

Kingdoms Within



A. A. GOMEZ



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ELENA A. GOMEZ

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INTRODUCTION

The Letter

My journey started during the summer of 1992, when I was given a letter my maternal grandfather, Arnulfo Perez Pena, had written to my mother, H. Elena Perez, in 1979. In it he wrote about the anguish he had suffered during his life, not knowing the actual date of his birthday, but now he was finally experiencing joy because he had discovered his true birth date. For eighty-three years, my grandfather had been unsure of his birth date until 1979, when he obtained his birth certificate. In his letter, he informed my mother that he had just acquired his mother's death certificate. She had died years earlier at the age of twenty-two when my grandfather was about four years old. Unfortunately, he had forgotten to get her birth certificate but hoped to get it on another occasion. Since his mother, Maria Zapopa Pena, died when my grandfather was very young, he had little recollection of her. His only memory was that sometime after his mother's death, my grandfather and his three siblings went to live with some close relatives. Not only did he have no knowledge of his

birth date, but after his mother died, his father hardly took the time to talk to him or his siblings about their mother. However, one must not judge a person's actions when a loved one has passed. Perhaps my grandfather's reason for wanting to obtain his mother's birth certificate was to have some closure about who she was.

I don't know why it took him so long to discover the true date of his birth. What I do know is that throughout his life, he experienced restlessness due to not knowing his birth date. When he did discover the information he was looking for, death took his life nine months later. Although he was unable to obtain his mother's birth certificate, his desire to obtain it would one day become my mission. The mission I had chosen to accomplish would lead me to uncover data far beyond my wildest dreams.

CHAPTER 1

My Family

This is a story not only of my maternal grandfather but also of my family, which came from two northern states in Mexico. My father's side of the family was from Nuevo Leon, Mexico, while my mother's side was from Coahuila, Mexico. These states are next to each other, and both border the United States. The two northern states where my parents and their families are from are very hot and dry, especially during the spring and summer seasons. It is so hot and dry there that when we visited the place, it reminded me of a desert. When my sister and I were young, my father, Alonso, told us stories about his mother, Santos, and her three sisters. He talked about how my grandmother had lost her parents when she and her sisters were very young. My grandmother and her siblings went to live with an aunt after her parents passed away.

My father seldom spoke about his father, Manuel, who died a few years before my parents were married. My father told us that he and his family used to live in the United States when my father was three years old. On one occasion,

while my paternal grandfather had been working in the United States as a lumberjack, a tree fell and tore off his left arm. Due to that accident, my paternal grandparents and the family had to return to Mexico, because my grandfather was no longer able to work as a lumberjack.

Time passed, and my grandfather lost both legs due to diabetes and remained in a wheelchair for the rest of his life. While my grandfather was still alive but unable to walk, my father had to take care of the ranch his parents owned. He took care of that ranch for many years to provide for his parents, two siblings, and his aunt Pilar, who never married.

My father used to tell us that he lived on the ranch alone and had nobody to talk to unless he went to another farm many miles away and visited his neighbors. He mentioned that whenever he visited those neighbors, he talked so much that the neighbors ended up going to bed, and he had to shut off the lights before returning to his own ranch. His life on the ranch seemed to have been very hard and lonely, but unfortunately somebody had to do the work, so his family could survive since my paternal grandfather could no longer provide for them.

My father never described the ranch as having lots of animals; he talked only about the cows they owned and the snakes that liked to slither on the hot ground. I remember him telling us about the snakes and that he killed them to get their fat. He told us that the snakes' fat was used to heal ailments. He used the fat whenever his cattle had medical problems, and somehow the cows eventually got better.

After years of living on the ranch by himself, my father eventually decided to return to the United States. He found

jobs working as a cook in Texas and one or two other southern US states. He always told us that the young ladies who worked with him liked to chase him and at times asked him to marry them, but at that time, he hadn't met the right person to marry. Eventually he met a young lady and married her, but unfortunately, she became ill and passed away. Years went by, and he moved to Illinois and worked in a quarry. He was forced to leave the job when he became sick due to the environment, but luckily some of his friends helped him get a job working at the us steel mill. His job there was very hard and tiresome. Since he had little education and his English was limited, he had no choice but to continue doing the job he had. Time passed, and he returned to Mexico for vacations. He had friends in Mexico who wanted him to meet someone, and they introduced him to my mother. By now my father was in his forties, and my mother was in her thirties. The time seemed right, and both he and my mother decided to get married in the city of Torreon, surrounded by all their family members. Immediately after they were married, my mother moved to the south side of Chicago to make a new life with my father, who by now had been living in the United States for many years prior to their marriage. Luckily for both of my parents, they had all the documentation they needed to live in the United States as legal citizens, so although my father had difficult jobs, both he and my mother had peace of mind in knowing they were living in the country as legal immigrants.

Life was very different for my mother when she decided to go to the United States. The weather was much colder; for family she had only one uncle and his family living in

Chicago. The financial situation was different for her now compared to that in her hometown. Lacking a higher level of education, my father was unable to provide for my mother in the way she was used to with her family. Although my mother's family wasn't extremely wealthy, she wasn't used to doing so much work around the house.

Back home my maternal grandparents always had someone who helped around the house, so the only thing my grandmother did was cook. As for my mother and her siblings, housework wasn't on the list. Married life was different for my mother. She had to do the household chores by herself, since my father was busy working at the mill, and there wasn't enough money to splurge on a maid. Luckily for my mother, she had taken English classes back in her hometown, so when she came to this country, she had no trouble communicating with the people at the stores whenever she went shopping.

My mother was about five feet, five inches, tall and thin. My father was of average weight and on the short side for a man. He was about the same height as my mother. As for the tone of their skin, our family, including my sister and me, had a creamy color. The folks from Mexico's northern states, back when we were growing up, tended to be different in features and skin color compared to those from southern states of Mexico, who are traditionally darker in skin color and whose features seem to be somewhat different. Therefore, my parents were always being mistaken as Italian or Greek, perhaps because our ancestors had a lot of Spanish ancestry.

My sister and I were born in Chicago on the same day

because we happen to be twins; however, we aren't identical. My sister looks more like my father's side of the family, while I look more like my mother. We both have brown eyes, and at one time when we were young, our hair was brown. In the summer, the color of my hair looked like that of a penny, so my sister called me Lenny Penny. Although my sister is only five minutes older than I, there were times when she looked at least one year older. I was about one inch shorter and thinner, while my sister was neither skinny nor overweight. I always wanted to be chubbier when I was young, until I got to be about thirty-five. By then my metabolism started to slow down, and the pounds started to stick.

All the people in our neighborhood knew we were twins. My mother always had us dress alike. I didn't mind dressing like my sister because I never liked picking out what we had to wear the next day. If I had something to wear, I didn't care what I looked like. I always left that decision to my sister until we became high school freshmen. Then we decided to choose our own clothes. Being a twin had its pros and its cons. The good thing was that I always had a sister to hang around with. I never had the problem of having to look for a friend or two because my sister was my friend. She was always smarter than I, so when we were young and had to study for a test, my sister was always around to help me get the information in my head. At that time, I really didn't care about taking tests. I just liked playing, while my sister was busy worrying about the test questions. When we got the test results, her scores were always higher. Since I was used to this, it didn't bother me. I knew I had done my best and had passed.

Then there was the cons. If you are a twin and you aren't identical, there is always someone who might ask who the smartest or prettiest is. I don't know what it's like to grow up as a twin nowadays; however, the people my parents met many years ago always used to ask dumb questions, perhaps because they weren't too smart. As the years passed, it really didn't matter who was smarter or prettier. My sister and I received degrees from DePaul University, and I went on to get a master's degree in education. As for our looks, we eventually had to wear makeup to improve them.

The south side of Chicago was very cold during the winter months. I remember my mother packing us up with warm clothes on those cold winter days, and soon after getting all bundled up, either my sister or I told her one of us had to go to the bathroom. The winter clothes had to be taken off so either my sister or I could use the facilities.

Then there was the topic of owning a car. My parents never owned one. Whenever we had to buy groceries, my mother or father took the famous grocery cart and filled it up with groceries we would need for the next week. I guess you could say the grocery cart was our car. Instead of the grocery cart transporting us from place to place, it was used to transport our groceries from the supermarket to our house. The worst part was dragging a loaded grocery cart packed with food through the snow. Nevertheless, somehow my parents always managed to get that grocery cart packed with food back home.

My sister and I always spoke in Spanish to my parents. However, when we spoke and still speak to each other, it was and still is always in English. While we were growing up on

the south side of Chicago, we were lucky to have a pair of twin friends who were also born in the United States. While we played with our friends, we had the opportunity to practice the English language. We also had other friends in the neighborhood who had been born in the United States. Therefore, we had lots of opportunities to learn English. When we went to school, both my sister and I spoke fluent English; therefore, we were able to communicate with our teachers and classmates.

As we grew older, we enjoyed playing cops and robbers, baseball, hide-and-seek, and many other fun activities kids played back then. We were very fortunate to grow up in a time and place where children and parents didn't have to worry about dodging bullets or avoiding other situations due to crime in the neighborhood. Back then we had the freedom to have as much fun as we wanted. Most parents didn't even worry about issues related to being overweight.

CHAPTER 2

My Father's Family

As summer approached, we always knew it was time to head south to Texas and Mexico. Because my parents didn't own a car or have any interest in owning one, we went on either the train or the Greyhound bus to Texas. Going to Texas or Mexico on an airplane was out of the question. I never knew the reason for that; perhaps it was because my father didn't earn much. All I knew was that our trip was on either a train or a bus. Although I always enjoyed our trips to Texas on a train, there were those nights when my sister and I had to sleep on the uncomfortable seats only to find ourselves having fist fights over who was taking more butt space. Our fist fights lasted less than a minute, and then we resumed the same position and went back to sleep until the next morning.

Then there was the time when I went to the bathroom by myself. Thinking I would be able to unlock the bathroom door easily, I decided to lock the door for my own privacy. Once it was time for me to get out, however, I found myself trapped inside the tiny room, unable to escape. The

first thing I thought was to scream at the top of my lungs for help. Having a very loud voice in a small body, since I was relatively young, I was able to get the attention of my mother, who alerted the conductor that there was someone trapped in the bathroom. Once I was able to get out, I remained in my seat until we arrived at our destination.

Other than the bathroom issue, my mother was always very careful and protective of us. She made sure we were close to her compared to my father. My father was too busy talking with passengers he had just met on the bus or train to notice us. The fact that my mother was more cautious with my sister and me perhaps led my father to leave that responsibility to her.

I remember the trains having dining cars that looked so elegant, yet we seldom ate there because my mother usually brought sandwiches. The bus didn't include a dining area; therefore, the bus driver had to make stops in different states. Those were the times when we had to get off the bus for a short time and eat. When it was time for us to get back on the bus, it was always the same story; my mother, my sister, and I always worried that my father might not make it back on the bus. He always chose to go to the bathroom at the last minute when the bus was ready to leave for the next destination. Once we saw him get on the bus, we were stress free, and the bus driver continued on his journey to Texas.

The scenery and climate became very different as we traveled south compared to those of Chicago. Once the bus or train traveled a certain distance away from Chicago, the towns seemed to be smaller, the color of the soil appeared lighter, and the temperature outside felt warmer. The people

even looked different. They seemed to dress more like those who had lived on farms with cowboy hats and boots. They looked funny because I wasn't used to seeing people dressed like that in the city.

My parents always took us to visit both sides of the family until we were about the age of five. After that time my mother, my sister, and I seldom returned to my father's hometown because my paternal grandmother died before we were six years old. My paternal grandfather, Manuel, died before my parents were married. I don't remember much about my grandmother's appearance other than her being on the thin side and short. I believe I inherited my skinny legs from her, because I can't remember anyone else in the family on my mother's side with skinny legs.

My grandmother always liked to sit on her rocking chair and spend her time talking with her sister Pilar. My great-aunt Pilar was around the same age as my grandmother. She was tall and thin with grayish eyes. She had that European look, perhaps like the women from Greece. I always wondered why she never married. My father used to say she was very picky with the guys who liked her. At times I think I may have inherited the pickiness from my dear great-aunt Pilar. I never married the ones I met; it just never worked out. Since she never got married, she was always taking care of my grandmother. Whenever we went to my father's hometown, my great-aunt Pilar gave my two cousins, Laura and Simon, and my sister, Lulu, and I each a Mexican coin to buy different-flavored ice cubes at the local store. I recall the time when my cousins, Laura and Simon, dragged their Dalmatian dog with us to purchase some ice cubes with the

money my great-aunt had given us. Somehow their dog got ahold of chocolate candy, and its snout was covered with chocolate. Back then we were too young to know that dogs weren't supposed to eat chocolate; luckily nothing happened to their dog. Perhaps the amount of chocolate he was given wasn't enough to make him get sick or die.

As we walked to the store to buy the ice cubes, I remember seeing rows of homes leading us to our destination. As I recall those small homes in that town, I am reminded of the homes I saw in the movie *Volver*, starring Penelope Cruz, which was filmed in Spain. While the streets in Agualeguas were narrow, the homes had large windows with metal bars in front of each. At night, when it was time to go to bed, I remember the adults put a large, thick piece of wood across the doors to keep intruders from coming in. I couldn't understand why they put such a large, thick piece of wood across the door, since there wasn't much for anyone to steal. Besides, I never heard talk of any thieves in town to do the job.

When night arrived, I looked up at the night sky and saw hundreds of tiny blinking stars. Looking at the stars made me feel as though each star represented a tiny window in the dark sky, through which people who had passed away could peek to get a glimpse of their descendants. When morning arrived, we got up and took a bath in a big metal tub my grandmother had in one of her rooms. I recall my mother pouring warm water into the tub so my sister and I could take a warm bath. Taking a bath in that tub was like having half of my body in heaven, while the other half was in the North Pole. It didn't matter if it was summer; I still

felt cold if my entire body wasn't submerged in the tub. I never enjoyed taking baths in that tub. Nevertheless, it was better than being stinky for the day.

Although my paternal grandmother's house was very tiny, it always felt warm and cozy except when I had to take a bath in the tub. I remember the smell of hot coal as the food was being prepared for lunch or dinner. Then there were those delicious pastries we ate during the day. I slightly recall what they looked like or how they tasted, but the aroma of that sweet bread still exists in my mind. Then there were some sweet bean dish, called *dulce de frijol*, and dry meat, or *carne seca*, my aunt Pilar cooked for the family.

The town of Agualeguas was very small, hot, and dry. I don't remember seeing any paved streets back then. The few times my mother, sister, and I went to Agualeguas with my father to visit my paternal grandmother, we stayed for a couple of weeks and then went to my maternal grandparents' town in Coahuila, Mexico. Once my paternal grandmother and her sister, Pilar, passed away, things changed. My mother, sister, and I returned to that tiny town only one more time, while my father continued to visit his hometown every time we visited my maternal grandparents.

As time went by, we continued to go to Texas and Mexico to visit our relatives for about two or three months during the summer. My mother, my sister, and I spent most of our summers in the small town of Frontera in the state of Coahuila, where my maternal grandparents lived. Since my father's job gave him only two weeks of vacation, he joined us for a couple of days with my grandparents. Then he tried to spend as much time as he could in his hometown

of Agualeguas, Nuevo Leon, Mexico or in Laredo with his sister, Hermelinda.

Before arriving in Mexico, we always went to Laredo, Texas, to visit my father's one and only sister, Hermelinda, who was the youngest of his siblings. My sister and I always had lots of fun going to my aunt's house, because we hung around with my aunt and uncle's youngest children, Laura and Simon. Laura was very pretty. Her skin was very fair, and her hair was dark, which made her skin tone appear even lighter. Her brother, Simon, was thin and very funny. He was always happy, and he enjoyed playing jokes on my cousin, Laura, my sister, and me. My aunt, Hermelinda, didn't look very much like my father. She was shorter, and her skin color was somewhat darker than that of my father's. Nevertheless, both my aunt and my father had one thing in common, and that was the texture of their skin. No matter how old they were, their skin always seemed to be free of wrinkles. My aunt had two older sons, Jorge and Lupe. Both got married to their girlfriends at a young age and soon had children of their own. I remember that Jorge's wife, Delia, and Lupe's wife, Oralia, were very nice. Since my sister and I were quite a few years younger than Jorge and Lupe, we liked playing with Laura and Simon. My aunt's husband's name was also Simon like their youngest son. Every time I saw my uncle, I thought of John Wayne. I always thought there was a similarity in appearance between my uncle Simon and John Wayne. Visiting my aunt's house in Laredo, Texas, was great until both of my cousins, Laura and Simon, passed away within a week of each other. They were about fifteen or sixteen years old when they suddenly

died. Both had respiratory problems, which affected their health, and eventually passed away. After the sudden death of my cousins, our visits to my aunt's house were very different now that my cousins had passed. Their deaths were very trying for my aunt and uncle. I remember how much my aunt cried whenever we visited her because she recalled the lives of her youngest son and only daughter. Yet life continues, no matter how much it can crush one's heart.

My father had a brother, Serapio. He and his family lived in Chicago. His wife's name was Maria. They had one daughter, Martha, and three sons, Everardo, Roberto, and Carlos. My father's brother, Serapio, unfortunately passed away a few years after my paternal grandmother died. The death of my uncle Serapio was a very trying time for my father and the family. My father was so devastated with the sudden death of his one and only brother that he ended up growing a beard and mustache as a sign of grief. Never seeing my father with a beard and mustache before, I thought he looked like a stranger to me. Yet in time, my father chose to remove both beard and mustache, since it was the period when Castro was becoming powerful in Cuba, and my father didn't want to be identified as part of that movement.

My father had a first cousin Leonardo who lived in Chicago. He and his wife, Yolanda, had a larger family consisting of very young children. Unfortunately, his wife passed away shortly after my uncle Serapio died. The deaths of my father's brother and cousin's wife brought much sadness to the family. When my uncle Serapio died, he left a wife and four children behind. When my father's cousin Leonardo's wife died, she left her husband and ten children

behind. It is implausible for someone who has never lost a parent at a young age to comprehend that kind of loss. I can only imagine being lost in a store as a child for just a couple of minutes. Those minutes feel like eternity while one's parent is nowhere to be found. Yet when one's parent is no longer there because of life's cruelty, one can barely imagine the emotions a child must feel in those circumstances. Life was hard for both families, yet with time, things changed for the better for those family members.

Even though my parents didn't own a car, they always managed to visit my uncle Serapio and my father's cousin Leonardo's family, who lived quite a distance from our house. I remember going to their homes and having to get on a couple of buses to get to their homes. As soon as we got on the bus, my sister fell asleep. I, on the contrary, never slept on any bus that took us to any destination while it was daylight. We didn't enjoy the bus trips to our relatives' homes, because of the route the bus had to cover. The only thing we did like about those trips was when the bus made its stop by a little restaurant. We got to enjoy hot dogs, fries, and a Coke. I know my uncle Serapio's family also didn't like taking the bus to our house for the same reason. However, when they became older and were able to buy their own cars, they were nice enough to give us a ride to their home.

My father had another cousin and his wife, Hermilo and Carmen, who were also close to my parents. They had five daughters and two sons. Their daughters were Mary, Susie, Yoli, Lisa, and Julie. When we were young, we mostly hung around with Yoli, since she was in the same classroom

throughout grammar school as my sister and me. Their sons' names were Milo and Joe. I remember when we were around seven years old. The teachers in the upper grades sent two students to help the students in our room with our classwork. At times I saw my cousins, either Mary or Susie, from the upper grades come into our classroom to help. I recall how old they seemed compared to us. As the years went by, I realized my cousins weren't that much older than my sister or I. My father's cousin Hermilo and his wife, Carmen, were always very close to us, even though my parents didn't have a car. They always visited my parents, even if my parents couldn't go to their house. Many times they picked us up in their car and took us to their house to spend the day there. They continued to stay close to my parents, even after my parents and I moved to the north side of Chicago. Even though time has gone by and both of my parents and Hermilo have passed away, his widow, Carmen, and her family continue to remain close to my sister and me.

CHAPTER 3

My Mother's Family

After spending a couple of days with my aunt Hermelinda and her family in Laredo, Texas, it was time to visit my mother's side of the family. Going to my maternal grandparents' home was always fun. My maternal grandfather, Arnulfo, always drove from his hometown Frontera Coahuila, Mexico, to Eagle Pass, Texas, where he picked us up and took us to see our relatives on my mother's side. He loved going to Eagle Pass, Texas, because he had a female cousin, Felis, whom he enjoyed visiting at least once a year. My maternal grandmother, Eloisa, usually remained at home and waited for us to arrive in my grandfather's small, white car.

Getting to my mother's hometown, Frontera Coahuila, Mexico, in my grandfather's car was always a trip in itself. My grandfather wasn't the greatest driver in the world. While he drove, he always enjoyed looking to the left and right so much that he barely kept his eyes on the road. He always looked at the mountains that surrounded the road while driving. I remember that my sister, my mother, and

I took deep breaths when we saw cars coming toward us. We didn't know whether my grandfather was going to drive past the cars or hit them, since he was busy watching the view around him. I soon realized why my grandmother didn't like getting into the car with him. I guess she wanted to make sure she lived longer by staying at home safe and sound rather than getting into a car accident with my grandfather at the wheel.

Getting to my grandparents' home also included a different backdrop than the one we saw in Chicago. Not only were there many mountains in that region, but the climate was very hot and dry, and the soil was a light brown. Instead of seeing green grass, there seemed to be large areas of mesquite, a tree or shrub that grows mainly in the US southwest or some areas of Mexico.

To make things worse, my grandfather's car didn't have the greatest air-conditioner in the world. It had no air-conditioning, and oddly enough, I always got stuck sitting in back on the driver's side. Henceforth, the sun was always sharing its rays on me and the driver in front of me. I never cared for the sun's rays in the summer, because they like to bake my skin. Nevertheless, I always felt that the sun loved me, because I always ended up sitting on the side where the sun was shining. It was as though the sun intentionally followed me, not my sister or mother. They always got to sit on the shady side of the car. Then to top it off, my grandfather had plastic covers protecting the car seats. Unfortunately, they weren't made to protect my legs or buttocks. I disliked those sticky plastic covers very much. When it was time to sit on the car seats, it was as though

I sat on fire. When it was time to get out of the car, my legs got stuck to the plastic as though it were glue. I felt as though the plastic were sucking my flesh, trying to force me to remain in the car as I retreated from the vehicle.

Upon arriving at my maternal grandparents' place, we made ourselves at home. We started unpacking and eventually went outside to search for figs on my grandmother's fig trees. My grandparents had a relatively nice, big house with marble floors. I thought their floors were out of this world, since back home we had only linoleum. My grandparents had air-conditioning, whereas our home had only fans. Back in Chicago, we had to stand in front of the fans to cool off, yet at my grandparents' home, we had the luxury of feeling the cool air, even if we weren't on top of the air-conditioner.

On the other hand, our home always had lots of water to take baths in comparison to my grandparents' home. They had to save the water at night in special tanks. Although taking a shower may not be considered an adventure, it was at my grandparents' house. My grandmother got up at five o'clock every morning and took a nice shower. My grandfather got up after her and took another shower. My mother followed the same routine, which meant they all had lots of water for showers. My sister and I, on the other hand, got up after seven in the morning, so by then there was hardly any water left. Since my grandparents' town was very hot and dry, the water supply was restricted. Therefore, when my sister or I took a shower, there was hardly any water to bathe with. I remember having to stretch my arm toward the showerhead so the stream of water could come down my hand, then my arm, and so on. By noon, there was

absolutely no water coming out from any faucet until later in the evening. I remember hearing people in that town collected water in special tanks during the night if they wanted to have a large amount of water during the day. I never understood why my grandfather wouldn't invest in purchasing those large containers. In the meantime, we had to continue stretching our arms to get whatever water was left or get up earlier. Nonetheless, as time passed, my grandfather eventually purchased the tanks needed, and our yoga stretches in the shower eventually came to a halt.

As the evening approached, I remember my grandmother and mother preparing dinner for my grandfather; my father, Alonso; my twin sister, Lulu; and me. The food my grandmother and mother prepared was always very good. My grandmother had a very different way of cooking compared to my aunt Pilar back in my father's hometown. I recall the different types of food my maternal grandmother cooked. She liked to cook steak, chicken with zucchini, beef with zucchini, young goat meat cooked on hot coals, potatoes with eggs, and countless other dishes good enough to make me lick my fingers.

When dinner was over, my mother and grandmother remained in the kitchen until all the dishes were clean, while my sister and I went outside to the patio to spend some time with my father and grandfather. As we headed outside to the porch, I quickly sat on one of my grandmother's many rocking chairs. I remember how much I loved to rock on her chair. I enjoyed rocking on it so much at times that it seemed as though I was going to flip. My grandfather and father accompanied us to the porch until my mother

and grandmother joined us before going to bed. When my grandfather sat on the rocking chair, his pants rose above his socks. My sister and I asked him why his legs were so white. His story was always the same: his family was of Spanish descent. Then he started talking about people who had come from Spain many years ago to settle in Mexico. Although my parents were Mexican, we knew most of our ancestors had come from Spain many years ago. We just didn't know when or from what parts of Spain they had come. I assume people didn't talk about those things back then. Besides, many family members had died very early in their lives. Perhaps that was another reason why my relatives didn't know much about their past. My grandfather always mentioned his siblings who had gone to California as very young adults to make a better living for themselves. He also mentioned that whenever he or his father went to the United States to visit family members, the border patrol people never asked them for their papers. They always assumed my grandfather and great-grandfather were Caucasian Americans born in the United States. If we tried to get more information about his immediate family, he began to cry, so we just stopped asking questions. Some of the few details we had that related to his young life were that his mother had died when he was approximately three or four years old, and within time my grandfather and his siblings were sent to live with other relatives, who abused my grandfather physically. However, upon learning about the physical abuse, my great-grandfather confronted his relatives, and my grandfather went to live with his father.

After my grandmother and mother finished cleaning

the kitchen, they joined us for a little while. By then it was dark, and the evening vampires or mosquitos were out to taste our blood. My grandmother always had to put a towel around her legs, because those little vampires were always out to get her first. She talked about her father, her siblings, some aunts and uncles, and even her grandparents. She seldom mentioned her mother, who had passed away when my grandmother was about thirteen years old. My grandmother Eloisa also had a light complexion, yet she was short and of medium built. I remember my grandmother having very nice legs. They were neither skinny nor fat. The reason why I remember her legs so well was because I always had the skinny legs in the family. My sister, Eloise had the same shape of legs as my grandmother. Not only were her legs well shaped, but she didn't have any veins to show off. I always seemed to have the red-and-blue road maps on my legs or varicose veins many women dread. I actually think I was born with road maps on my legs, because I never recall having clear skin on the backs of my legs.

My maternal grandmother told us about all the animals her father had. She mentioned the horses her father owned and that she went horseback side-saddle riding. She even mentioned how she handled the Pony Express and practiced her weight-lifting exercises every morning. She loved telling us about the history of Mexico, the presidents of Mexico, and those before her who had migrated from Spain to Mexico. It was as though life had a purpose for joining my grandparents in matrimony. Both were alike, since they had lost their mothers at an early age. Yet each had been brought up in a different economical circumstance. My grandfather

faced hardships while growing up, yet my grandmother had a more comfortable life. Although my grandmother's father, Segundo, remarried, my grandmother and her siblings remained with their father and formed a new family with his second wife, Queta, and their half siblings: Florencio, Segundo, and Bertha.

When we went to my maternal grandparents' town, there were lots of aunts, uncles, and cousins to see and visit. We were always being invited to relatives' homes to spend the day there. We enjoyed spending time with our cousins on my mother's side of the family, just as much as we did with my cousins on my father's side. My mother had two sisters and one brother. Her oldest sister, Neva, was married to my uncle Quique. He was born in Mexico, but his parents were from France. Whenever I watch *The Honeymooners*, I think of my uncle, because he looked just like Ed Norton. My aunt Neva and her husband never had children, so they weren't used to having kids around the house, except when we visited their home. My sister and I loved going to my aunt's house, because she had a tiny store that always seemed to hold treasures of candy and comic books, such as *Little Lulu* and *Archie*. My uncle Quique loved having us over, because he got to talk with us and ignore his customers, who stood by the counter and waited to be attended. Since my aunt and uncle had no children, there were moments when I drove my aunt crazy because of my walking around inside the store and looking at all the candies, while my sister sat and read comic books. I enjoyed reading comic books, but I also loved to search for candies. Having been childless, my aunt became nervous and yelled at me, because she

thought I would fall and get hurt while I was on my hunt for treasures of candies. I always seemed to ignore her, since I didn't care whether I fell. My concern was having fun while looking for goodies to eat. The last thing on my mind was taking care of myself in case I fell. We stayed at their home, which included their little store, for a couple of hours per day. Once it was lunchtime, my aunt started to give us hints that we had to go home. I didn't mind going back to my grandparents' home for lunch, since my grandmother always had something good to eat. I just didn't like the thought of having to walk back home in the middle of the day while the hot sun baked our skin, even if the trip lasted only a couple of minutes. I remember walking across my grandparents' town's square in the middle of the day. On our journey back to my grandparents' home from my aunt's house, I felt it was so hot that I imagined putting an egg on the ground and seeing it cook. It was so hot out there; I just knew from experience not to walk barefoot unless I wanted to burn the bottoms of my feet on the hot cement.

After lunch, everyone at my grandparents' home went to bed and take a siesta except for me. I never fell asleep during the daytime. Since my sister joined the rest of the family for siesta time, I had nobody to talk to other than the house employees my grandparents hired. I remember the warm, delicious tortillas they made by hand. Some were made with flour, and others were made with corn. I liked eating flour tortillas with butter on them. When I bit into those delicious flour tortillas, it was as though they were going to melt in my mouth. The only thing the servants didn't do was cook our meals. My grandmother always cooked for the family. I

remember every morning my grandmother cooked some eggs and put potatoes or tomatoes on the side. For lunch we had chicken or beef stew to start with. Afterward my grandmother cooked chicken with zucchini, steak, potatoes, rice, barbacoa, or cabrito, which is a kid or goat, for lunch. There were many other delicious recipes my grandmother made. Those were the most common foods my grandmother cooked.

My mother's second sister, Popana, had three children: Paco, Homero, and Lupita. Her husband's name was Francisco, but everyone called him Pancho. My aunt Popana had been named after my maternal grandfather's mother. We loved going to her house, because we always had fun playing with our cousin Lupita. She always had friends who invited her to the movies. Back then I remember watching American movies on the big screen and listening to the actors speak in English, while my cousin and the rest of the audience who didn't know any English had to read the subtitles in Spanish. I'm glad I didn't have to read the subtitles in Spanish. It had taken me a long time to read the words in Spanish, and I know I missed half of what had been said on the screen.

My cousin Lupita's skin color was very light. She had blondish hair. As for her two older brothers, we never used to hang around with them, because they were older than we were. We just said hi to them and then ignored them, as we did to all our male cousins on both sides of the family if they were quite a few years older than we were. Our cousin Lupita is five years older than my sister and me. Even though there's a five-year gap, we still had lots of things in common, like going to the movies, hanging around the plaza in front

of the town church, or going to the restaurant and having something to eat.

I remember my aunt made her own candles and sold them. Her husband had a warehouse, in which he kept large boxes of cookies and candies he sold to grocery stores. Whenever we got the chance, we went into the warehouse without his knowing, opened a box of cookies or candies, and ate them all. Afterward we went back into my aunt's kitchen and had a delicious lunch. I remember the delicious Mexican Flan my aunt made for dessert or the homemade ice cream we got to eat. There was always something fun to do with my cousin until it was time to go back to my grandparents' home, which was usually around three o'clock in the afternoon. The ride back to my grandparents' home took about twenty minutes in the hot sun. My uncle's truck didn't have plastic on the car seats like my grandfather's car did, so my legs never got stuck to the seats.

My mother also had a brother Adalberto, who was an eye surgeon. His wife's name is Cota. They had two daughters, Martha and Silvia, and three sons: Beto, Arnulfo, and Romeo. My aunt Cota was a great cook as were my other aunts. Whenever she invited us to her house, we knew she was going to have something very good for lunch. My mother's brother was a very good son to my grandparents. He made sure he visited them every morning before going to his office. We enjoyed visiting my uncle's house because we got to play with his two daughters and three sons on those hot summer days in Mexico. Every time we went to my uncle's house, there was always something to do with my cousins, even though my sister and I were a bit older than my cousins.

Although my sister and I didn't have rich parents, we were used to seeing what it was like to be well off in Mexico. Some relatives were wealthier than we were, so it was normal to see that side of the spectrum. I knew they were wealthier than we were because of their fancy homes and cars. Back in Chicago, we lived in a simple house, had no car, and never saw a maid. Nevertheless, our economic situation didn't seem to bother us. We always had enough to eat, warm clothes to wear in the winter, a roof over our heads, and an abundance of water to bathe with. As for transportation, well, we used the bus or local train to get around, and that never held us back from getting to our destination.

There were times when my grandparents and mother took us to the town where my mother and her siblings had been born. That also was a very hot and dry area, since it was just minutes from where my grandparents lived. The town's name is Nadadores. The English translation for Nadadores is "swimmers." I never understood why that town was named Nadadores, because in reality it was very hot and dry. I couldn't imagine any swimmers living in that location. Perhaps hundreds of years ago there may have been lots of water in that area, which made the people name the town Nadadores. In reality I don't know the reason for the name, mainly because I never read the history of that town. Whenever my grandparents took us to Nadadores, we visited an area that had a stream. That area always had lots of trees with much shade. I remember being very young, dipping my feet in the cool water, and sitting on the smooth rocks in the stream. It was so hot there that when we got out of the water, I never felt cold. I was too concerned about my

feet. I didn't want to get poked with any sharp stones. Later, my grandmother and mother took out the flour tortillas with either avocado or chorizo, a Mexican sausage mixed with eggs, and we had lunch by the stream, enjoying our cold bottles of Coke.

On some occasions, my grandparents took my mother, my sister, and me to visit Segundo, one of my grandmother's brothers. The English translation for his name is "second." It never made sense to me why anyone would name his or her son Segundo. I always liked going to my great uncle's house, because he and his wife had the best-looking family I had ever placed my eyes on. One day when we went to visit them, after taking a good look at his family. I suddenly turned to my sister and asked, "How come we don't have their looks?" Not only were they good looking, but they were also very nice. She looked at me and asked me the same question. Being very young, it never occurred to us that we couldn't have their looks because we had different parents who had different genes. As time passed, I realized looks didn't matter as long as we were healthy.

It was always nice spending time with our relatives in Mexico for a month or two until it was time to return to Chicago. That was the hardest thing for my mother to do, because it meant she wouldn't be able to see her family for another year. My grandmother was very strong. Although we knew it was hard for her to see her daughter and granddaughters return to Chicago, she tried not to show how much she would miss us. My grandmother did it to make it easier for my mother as my grandfather, in his white car and plastic-covered seats, took us back to the border.

CHAPTER 4

Coming Home

Once we arrived in Chicago and I weighed myself, I always seemed to have left ten pounds behind. I never understood why I always lost so much weight, knowing I had been well fed at my grandparents' home. Perhaps the fact that the food we ate was less fattening plus the fact that we didn't consume any milk may have contributed to my weight loss. Another reason for losing ten pounds could have been due to the hot summer we had experienced, which was similar to a sauna. I didn't like the idea of losing weight because I was always skinny; my wish was to gain pounds, not lose them. It was always very hard for me to gain the weight back. By the time I regained the ten pounds, it was time to return to Mexico. Therefore, I was always skinny.

After years of paying rent on the far south side of Chicago, my parents decided to move out of that building and buy an old house with five apartments and a cottage in the back. I never liked the outside appearance of the front building my parents bought. It was tall and red.

Unfortunately, the red part of the house wasn't brick. I believe the material was slate. By now we were about eight years old. I remember being in the house my parents had just purchased when my mother's friend stopped by to tell her about President Kennedy's assassination. As one can imagine, we were all shocked. Hearing that information was so terrible that even though decades have passed, I still remember those moments. The entire country and perhaps even the world were mourning the terrible ordeal of President Kennedy and his family. Not long after that horrible incident occurred, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy were also assassinated in 1968, both in the same year. Although my sister and I were relatively young, I remember those days very well, because something terrible had occurred in our country. These men were peaceful citizens of the United States, yet cowards had taken their lives in a matter of moments.

My parents, my sister, and I were living in the back cottage on the same property where my parents had purchased the tall, red building I disliked. The one good thing was that although the little gray cottage was old, it had a better appearance than the tall, red building in front of it. The tall, red building brought my parents much toil. Since the house was so old, it had no bathtubs. The walls were in such terrible shape that each one had to be replaced. My father had a hard job working long hours in the steel mill. When he got home, he threw himself into bed for a couple of hours to recuperate from the hard work he put in to make a living. Later he had to get up to face more work in the building my parents had bought and return to his daily job at the mill.

Before my parents bought that property, it wasn't my mother's first choice. She knew the red building would bring lots of hardship to both of them, but my father was convinced it was the house of his dreams. Not having any other choice, my mother agreed, and my parents became the new owners of an old building. I remember my parents were constantly fixing that building for tenants so they could live in a decent place. Yet every time the tenants moved out, my parents had to fix what the tenants had messed up. It was a no-win situation. There was always painting to be done, new linoleum to be placed on the floors, and bathroom situations to be solved. I couldn't understand how tenants could have lived in that building before my parents bought it without having any bathtubs. How could anyone survive without taking a bath? As time went by, new bathtubs, sinks, and toilets were finally placed in every apartment, but the work was never done. If it wasn't one thing, there was always another thing that had to be repaired. After so many years of fixing that old house, you would think it looked new; well, unfortunately that wasn't the case. The house always continued to look old. Then there were the thoughtless tenants who loved to throw their cigarette butts on the walkway. How I disliked those tenants who loved to smoke, because I was the one who was constantly sweeping to make the place look nice and neat. The one good thing about the tenants my parents had was that they were always timely payers. My parents never had trouble collecting their rent. Since the rent was so cheap, perhaps that was the reason why the tenants didn't want to move. Other places were more expensive, so the tenants paid their rent on time.

One of the people who helped my father get ideas on how to fix that old building was my mother's uncle Alfonso. My mother didn't have any relatives who lived in Chicago other than her uncle and his family. He was my maternal grandfather's brother. My great-uncle had a wife, Maria. They had four older children: Silvia, Al, Yoli, and Robert. Although we didn't have a car, my parents always managed to keep in touch with my great-uncle and his family. His nickname was Poncho. I remember he always visited us, even if we couldn't visit his family. He reminded me a lot of my grandfather, who liked to visit his siblings whether they lived in Chicago or California.

I remember one occasion when my uncle Poncho and his family visited us. His daughters, Yoli and Silvia, were all excited because they were going to watch *The Ed Sullivan Show* that evening in our house. Ed Sullivan was going to have special guests on his show, the Beatles. I couldn't understand why my mother's cousins were so excited to watch some bugs on television. When I heard Yoli and Silvia mention the Beatles, I assumed they were talking about beetles until I realized they were four young guys with funny-looking hair and an unusual accent. Watching them on TV for the first time was fun. At least I didn't have to spend my time observing insects sing on TV.

My grandfather had other siblings who lived in either Texas or California. However, we never met those from California. My grandfather was the only one of his siblings who lived in Mexico. I remember I always wanted to go to California, because I knew there was a place somewhere out there named Disneyland. My grandfather told us one day

he took us to California, since he visited his family there on several occasions, but that day never arrived. I remember that my grandmother did take a trip to California once with my grandfather on a plane. They visited all his family, but she never returned.

CHAPTER 5

The Test Result

Time passed, and my mother wasn't feeling well. She decided to visit the doctor for a checkup. To her surprise and my father's, they found out she had breast cancer. I remember hearing the word *cancer* and not knowing what it meant. I just recall my mother being devastated when she heard what she had. Since there were lots of doctors in the family, my mother decided to return to Mexico so she could be attended to. My father agreed that we could go with her to Mexico while she had surgery and recovered. It was then that my aunts opened their doors to both my sister and me when we needed someone to take care of us, while my mother was getting treatments to fight cancer. My sister and I will always be grateful to both of my mother's sisters and my uncle's wife, Cota. I remember my mother and my grandmother having to spend time in the city of Monterrey, Nuevo Leon, while she was receiving treatments to fight the cancer. My grandfather took us on the weekends from their hometown to Monterrey so we could visit my mother while she and my grandmother

remained there. My sister and I spent weeks at our aunts' homes, whether it was at our aunt Neva's, aunt Popana's, or our aunt Cota's. Each took turns taking care of us while my mother recovered from her illness.

The month of September arrived, and my mother and grandmother returned to my grandparents' home. Not being able to return to the States due to my mother's condition, my sister and I were required to go to school in the small town of Monclova. Since we were going to have to spend more time in Mexico until my mother fully recovered from her surgery, it was necessary for us to attend school. School in Monclova was quite different from the one back home. The classes were all in Spanish. Although my sister and I spoke Spanish, our ability to read and write it wasn't as good as those students who were originally from Mexico. When we enrolled in school, we had to spend our days in the fourth grade rather than in the sixth grade. We made lots of new friends in the couple of months while we attended school there. It was nice going to a different school, but I hated having to take the bus to get there. I remember when my sister and I had to wait by a corner for the school bus in the hot sun. That corner was right in front of a little store. Unfortunately for us, the owner was too stingy to let us wait inside his store until the bus arrived. There were times when we had to roast like chickens, waiting for our bus ride. As time passed, the months became cooler, and the sun eventually stopped frying our skin at the bus stop. By now arrangements had been made for the school bus to go to my grandparents' house. I remember attending that Catholic school with nuns. Instead of talking about God

and Jesus, the nun told us where we went if we didn't obey. I never did understand why someone would want to become a nun if she planned to teach her students negative things. We never complained to my mother. I don't know about the other students, but thank God my sister and I ignored her, so fortunately we never had nightmares.

Time passed, and luckily my mother was getting better. The Christmas season was upon us, and we were still at my grandparents' home. That Christmas was very different from the ones we were used to in Chicago. That was the year when I first understood why my grandmother never celebrated Christmas Eve or Christmas Day. Growing up, I couldn't understand why my grandmother was against such a wonderful holiday. It was one of the holiest times of the year, the night baby Jesus had been born. Yet it was a time tragedy had struck my grandparents many years prior to this Christmas. When my grandparents were young, they lost their youngest son, who was only four years of age. His name was Romeo. The sudden death of their youngest son took them by shock and devastation. Unfortunately, his death occurred on either Christmas Eve or Christmas Day. I never asked because I didn't want to remind my grandmother of the tragedy they had experienced. Since then my grandmother had decided to keep those two days as a memory of her son's death, not a celebration of the birth of our Lord. My mother had mentioned that event to us on previous occasions, but I never really understood what it meant to my grandmother until the Christmas we spent at my grandparents' place. That year we had no Christmas tree; however, we did get a couple of presents, cookies, and

chocolate milk. Although that holiday wasn't like those we would celebrate back in Chicago, it was the one that helped me understand what it had been like for my grandparents to lose someone so dear to them.

Shortly after the month of December, my mother was told she had recovered. My mother, my sister, and I returned to the United States. As always, returning home was one of the hardest times for my mother. She knew she wouldn't see her parents or close relatives until the next summer. Although you could tell it was hard for my grandmother to see her daughter and granddaughters leave, my grandmother always tried to comfort my mother so she wouldn't feel so bad. Once we returned to the States, my sister and I headed back to school to meet our new teacher and classmates, and eventually we were able to finish the school year in sixth grade. Luckily we were able to go to seventh grade the following school year. The winter months passed, as did the spring. Eventually summer arrived, and off we were to visit our grandparents. My father was a very understanding husband and father. Although we stayed in Mexico for a long time while my mother recovered from cancer, he didn't complain when it was time for us to return to my mother's hometown the next summer.

CHAPTER 6

A Visit to Chicago

Considering my grandfather had lost his mother at an early age and had lived a rough childhood, he was very fortunate to have become an accountant. This job allowed him to give my grandmother, Eloisa; my mother, Hortencia; and her three siblings (Neva, Popana, and Beto) a comfortable life in a small town in Mexico. When my uncle was young, he was sent to medical school and became an ophthalmologist, my two aunts became teachers, and my mother studied accounting. Each lived a life of comfort, although some lived a more comfortable one than others.

In the years to come, my grandfather became interested in politics and for a short time became "president" or, as we define it in the United States, a mayor. During the years my grandfather was mayor of his town, I remember the times he went to Mexico City for political reasons I didn't understand. I recall the nice Christmas presents my grandparents got from close friends and relatives. My grandparents had a China cabinet in their dining room that

contained various types of glassware they had collected as presents. Even though my grandparents weren't rich, they always managed to afford to have more than three people work around the house. Some cleaned the house, and others washed and ironed clothes, while others fixed the garden or washed the car. Living a comfortable life wasn't enough for my grandfather. He always seemed to carry grief inside while just thinking of the fact that his mother had died when he and his siblings were young. I remember him mentioning time after time that neither he nor his siblings had ever been given a picture of what their mother looked like. At the same time, he couldn't recall her facial features; nor did he know the date of his birthday.

Every year that went by, it was the same story; summer approached, and we knew it was time to head to Mexico. As we became older, my sister and I started to get tired of having to return to Mexico for the summer. We often asked our relatives why they wouldn't come to Chicago to pay us a visit. It was always the same excuse; it was too far for them to come to Chicago. It never made sense to me. The distance we traveled to see them was the same distance they had to travel to see us. Hence, we asked them why it was far for them to come to Chicago and not far for us to travel to Mexico. Nonetheless, it was always our turn to go and pay everyone a visit. There were a few times when my maternal grandparents were able to visit us. The few times my grandmother visited Chicago she asked my mother why there were so many overweight people in Chicago. That was over fifty years ago. I can't imagine what she would have thought had she visited the city now.

On one occasion my grandparents visited us in Chicago. My parents, sister, grandfather, and I visited Grant Park and walked along the shoreline. While we were watching the boats by the lake, the sunny day quickly became cloudy. My parents thought it would be a good idea to return home. As we headed toward the train station, we saw the dark sky as the accumulation of raindrops felt like buckets as they drenched our backs. The rain was so strong that my family and I had to lean against the trees to seek protection from the rain. Fortunately, there was no lightning or thunder. By the time the rain was over, our clothes just stuck to our bodies. As we arrived at the Illinois Central train station to catch the train back home, I could envision a pair of dry pajamas waiting at the doorstep. That was the last time my grandparents visited Chicago.

CHAPTER 7

School Days

Our grammar school years back on the south side of Chicago were happy times. Since the school we attended had only one classroom for each grade level, both my sister and I shared the same classroom and pretty much the same friends. Time passed, and my sister and I soon headed to high school. The high school we attended wasn't one of the best. I remember walking through the halls like a zombie, ignoring the weirdos walking in the opposite direction. While in high school, I took advantage of the French classes the school offered. Since I was very good in French, I ended up in advanced placement classes for the next two years. Eventually the two teachers I liked left, and I was stuck with an instructor who would ignore my friend and me. He would direct his attention only to those students who had come from an island where French was their native language. Unfortunately, the teaching methods used in other classes I had weren't what I would describe as good either. One instructor spent his time talking about his newborn daughter instead of about the subject. Another teacher

spent his time chewing his fingernails, because the students wouldn't listen to him. Besides having stubby fingernails, I always wondered why he had such bloodshot eyes. He reminded me of a vampire, prancing back and forth in our classroom, only instead of sucking our blood he was busy chopping his fingernails. Then there were the teachers who did care about the students and enjoyed teaching us. They didn't ignore me just because someone else knew more or spent their time talking about irrelevant things, such as their infant daughters. On the contrary, they would explain so we could all understand and learn. Those were the teachers I treasured. The treasure they shared with their students was that of teaching so we could learn.

During our junior year, the mayor of Chicago and other politicians decided to send twenty of the top students from the Chicago public high schools to the Peoples' Republic of China. This would be the first group of American students to visit the People's Republic of China since the visit of former President Nixon. My sister, Lulu, being very smart, was one of the twenty students chosen. They had to take lots of tests and go through a lot of training before they were chosen as the final twenty students. At first, I didn't think my sister was going to be able to go. It wasn't because I didn't think she was smart enough but because my parents were extra strict. They wouldn't allow my sister or me to go anywhere outside the city of Chicago without them much less out of the country. Due to the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, my parents agreed to let her go on the trip.

Before going, the group of students and their families were invited to visit Chicago's China Town. That was the

first time my family and I had ever gone to China Town. We had a great time. I remember eating Chinese food for the first time. I still remember the delicious soup we were given. My parents bought each of us a pair of red Chinese shoes and some Chinese blouses. Everyone was excited about the trip. The students going to China even appeared on the local news. The day finally arrived when my sister and the group of students were to go to China. This was going to be the first time in my life that my sister and I would be separated for some time. Being twins is very different from being just sisters. When you're a twin, your life is pretty much a part of your twin's, but I got over it, and my sister spent about twenty days on her own away from the family. Her group visited cities like Beijing and Shanghai. They also visited the Great Wall of China. She and her group were able to see places and people far beyond our imaginations. Coming back, they stopped in Hong Kong, Tokyo, and Hawaii. Even though I didn't go on the trip, I was able to get lots of things my sister brought back from China. I was also able to learn a little bit of Mandarin from a little book my sister had been given before leaving for China. When my sister returned, she showed us lots of pictures she took on the trip. Being able to see China with the pictures my sister had taken was like visiting another country far away from the one I was used to seeing. The Chinese people were so different from those I was used to seeing in Chicago. Their clothes didn't look like the clothes I was used to wearing, and the building structures in China were far different from the ones in Chicago. Although I didn't join my sister on her trip, it gave me the opportunity to learn for the first time

that although people from other parts of the world may have different appearances and different cultures, we all have a need to belong, to love and be loved.

As our high school years were coming to an end, I recall that my mother constantly drilled the importance of going to college. She and a friend of hers took my sister, her friend's daughter, and me to different universities to get a feel for them so we could decide which one we would like the best. Visiting different universities was a great experience. The most interesting experience was when we visited the library in each university. Although our high school had a library, it was quite different from those of the universities we visited. I felt as though I was in a different world while visiting each university.

Months passed, and my sister became the school valedictorian for our graduation. Strange how success can have both a positive and a negative impact on one's life. Having been a valedictorian in high school and having the opportunity to visit the People's Republic of China brought conflict to my sister and my life, even though I had nothing to do with that title or the trip. I remember times when certain classmates demonstrated their negative feelings toward my sister simply because of the title she had achieved. Although I didn't share the same title, I was also treated with animosity. The jealousy some classmates showed my sister transferred to me. Luckily this lasted a short time, since we eventually graduated from high school and were on our way to a new life, one that took us in a different direction and would help impact our future. We finally decided which university we would attend, and that was DePaul University in Chicago.

When my sister and I chose DePaul University, things began to change. Classes were different from those in high school. There was more to read, and there were more tests to take. Now we had to take two trains to get to our destination instead of walking two blocks to our nearby high school. During our college years, there were times when I decided to take summer classes so I would postpone my trips to Mexico or Texas. Although DePaul University was far from home, I loved attending it. We had lots of friends there. I remember my sister and I had to get up very early to catch two trains to get to DePaul. When our classes were over, we had to hurry and catch two trains to get back home before it became dark.

During the winter months, the days were a lot shorter, so by five p.m., it looked like midnight. My mother always asked whether we could get her the local newspaper from the DePaul University neighborhood. She wanted to buy a house in that neighborhood. My sister and I were so busy going to and from DePaul that we didn't even try to get a paper for her in all the years we attended DePaul. I couldn't understand why my mother wouldn't go to DePaul with us one day and search for homes that were for sale or get a newspaper and look in the ads. I just assumed she wasn't very interested in buying a house. My concern was getting through the classes and catching the trains on time. As a result my mother unfortunately never found the house she wanted.

While I was attending DePaul, I always tried to gain weight. Gaining weight was one of the hardest things for me to do. I just couldn't get to one hundred pounds. I forced

myself to eat the French fries sold in the cafeteria. Not liking fries, it was a sacrifice just to get them down my throat. Unfortunately, eating French fries never worked. I continued to be the skinny ninety-pound student at DePaul until I graduated. My sister graduated from college one year before I did. For the first couple of years at DePaul, I couldn't decide what I wanted to do with my life. Every time I picked a major, I ended up changing my mind. The subjects just didn't interest me. Finally, after taking so many different classes, I decided to take education courses and eventually graduated from college with a bachelor's degree in science in the field of elementary education.

CHAPTER 8

A Teaching Job

In the month of October 1979, I finally found a job working with the Chicago Board of Education. I tried getting a job at local Catholic schools by my house, but for some reason or other, I was never able to get hired. The nuns always wanted to give me the upper grades, and those were something I didn't want. My cousin Martha suggested that I apply with the Chicago Board of Education. That was something I didn't want to do. I had always heard working for the Chicago Board of Education was very difficult. Not being able to find a job, I had no other alternative but to apply for a job working with the Chicago Board of Education. It was already the end of September, and all my friends from DePaul University had a job except me. When I went to the Chicago Board of Education, I was asked if I spoke Spanish. At that time, I didn't even know what a bilingual teacher was. I had never heard of that term. I replied that I did speak Spanish, and before I knew it, I was to take some Spanish tests given by the board and the state. The tests were very difficult, because they were in Castilian, which is

Spanish spoken in Spain. I was used to listening and speaking to the Spanish language, which was spoken in Mexico. So the Castilian I was confronted with during the tests was an entirely different ball game. Nevertheless, I managed to pass all the exams.

When I went to apply for the job as an elementary grade teacher, I suddenly found myself holding a position as a Spanish bilingual teacher. Most Spanish bilingual classrooms have an entire group of children who speak Spanish. My situation was different. About 90 percent of the students I knew spoke perfect English, because they were Caucasian children born in the United States. The other 10 percent of the children were Mexican children, whose native language was Spanish. I remember the first day I set foot into my new classroom. All I could see were little creatures jumping and running all over the room, totally ignoring the teacher, who was teaching at that time. As I walked into the classroom and found myself being their new teacher to a group of roughly thirty third graders, the only question I asked myself was, "When am I going to retire?" As the days passed, I eventually finished testing all the students to see what they scored in reading and discovered that the majority of the students couldn't read. These were children in the third grade, yet most couldn't read at their level. At night I had nightmares just thinking about the next morning. I would face thirty students who didn't want to listen to what I had to say. I remember standing in front of the mirror every evening, practicing how to make stern faces and hoping my students would pay attention to what I had to say. My tactic never worked. My third-grade students didn't care whether

I stepped into the room; they just wanted to talk or walk around the room. That was a very challenging year, because I couldn't get the students' attention. To be able to teach, a teacher has to get the students' attention and interest. I had no idea what methods to use in case any students should have attention deficit disorder or learning disabilities. My educational background was basic, so I lacked the knowledge needed to really understand how to get these students to a higher reading, writing, and math level.

During the year in which I was hired to teach, someone very special visited our city. It was Pope John Paul II. He came to Chicago in early October shortly after becoming a pope. I was all excited, as was my family, because we were going to have the pope visit our hometown. The day he was to visit Grant Park, my family and I woke up very early and took the Illinois Central train to the Loop, which is the downtown area in Chicago. Luckily it was a beautiful day to see the pope. There were hundreds and hundreds of people by Grant Park. It almost looked like a sea of people as we cheered for His Holiness to appear. We were all eagerly waiting for the presence of the Holy Father. Then suddenly there he was. It was like a miracle. You could hear the people cheering as he appeared among the crowd. It was a very emotional time for all of us. Although there was cheering, you could feel a sacred calmness coming from the one we were chanting for. There were hundreds of people wearing their ethnic Polish clothes. There were people of all ages, races, and religions excited to see him. It was like seeing an ocean filled with little yellow-and-white papal flags, as people waved them in the air to welcome the pope. As the

hours passed it was time for His Holiness to depart, but before going, we were all honored to get his blessing. Soon the mass of people started to depart, and what had been a sea of eager onlookers eventually became a normal park.

The month of November 1979 arrived, and my family received the news that my grandfather had passed away. I remember my mother had to quickly go to Mexico, while my sister, my father, and I remained in Chicago. It was a very sad time for my family. I wasn't able to go to Mexico with my mother, because one month prior, I had just been hired to work for the Chicago Board of Education as a third-grade Spanish bilingual teacher. For the first time in my grandmother's married life, she was now going to have to live on her own. Luckily, she had two daughters and one son who lived in the same town as she did. Each of my aunts decided to share their time with my grandmother by taking care of her. Although my mother offered my grandmother to live with us for as long as she desired, my grandmother's heart was in her hometown. She decided to remain there while my mother returned to Chicago. Days passed, and my mother decided to show my sister and me a letter my grandfather had sent her almost nine months before his death. This was the letter in which he mentioned he had finally discovered the date he was born. Throughout his life, he never knew his actual birth date. It was something that kept bothering him all his lifetime. In the letter he also mentioned his desire to obtain his mother's birth certificate. At the time I was shown the note, I was experiencing a very difficult time at work. My main concern was managing my students' behavior and getting them to learn. Although I did

see my grandfather's letter, I dismissed the importance of it, which was his inability to have obtained his mother's birth certificate and the importance this certificate had for him.

The challenging school year came to an end. That summer my sister and her fiancé, Ralph, whom she had met at DePaul, decided to get married. The wedding turned out to be very nice. Considering my twin was getting married, I really had nothing to do with the arrangement of the wedding other than to stand up and be the bride's maid of honor. While I was involved with my teaching job, my sister was busy arranging things for her wedding. The wedding day arrived, and I danced all night with one of my sister's friends from high school. Never would I have imagined that I would eventually end up dating him for the next year. He was very handsome, nice, and well educated. He always liked to take me to dinner and to plays. I recall going to restaurants and seeing how the waitresses flaunted all over him, trying to make sure everything was fine. I was lucky they didn't forget to bring my food on a plate. That didn't matter to me, for I was the one sitting at the table, while they were the ones serving. Whenever he went to my parents' house and picked me up, I always asked him whether he had to go to the bathroom before we left on our date. His reply was always no. As soon as we left my parents' home, he always chose to drive through the roughest neighborhoods in Chicago. Although I suggested that he take a different route, he always ignored me. Suddenly, he parked the car and, leaving me alone inside it, went to the bathroom. It never made sense to me why he wouldn't go to the bathroom at my parents' home, yet he always had time to go to the bathroom in the roughest

neighborhoods of Chicago. This practice lasted for a year, but as time passed, so did he. As they say, some things just aren't meant to be. I eventually gave him the boot.

The beginning of my second school year arrived, and I remember complaining to myself that my students couldn't read. I finally came to the conclusion that complaining wasn't the solution to the problem. I decided to enroll at Roosevelt University and get my master's degree in reading. That summer I went to the campus in downtown Chicago. During that summer, I recall watching on television the moment thousands of people waited to see a future princess walk down the aisle to marry her prince. My mother and I stayed up all night and into the early morning hours just to see the wedding of beautiful Lady Diana Spencer and Prince Charles. Thank God it was a summer, and I didn't need to go to work. The wedding looked so beautiful on TV. Everything filmed in London that day was so foreign to us. The event caused my mother and me to become mesmerized just to see such elegance and splendor. I will never forget how tired I felt, but I was happy to know I would be able to sleep as long as I wished once the royal wedding was over. The only thing I had to worry about later that day was attending my class at Roosevelt University. Time passed as I continued to take more classes at Roosevelt University. I started to see the change in my students. As I was gaining more knowledge and understanding as to why my students were having difficulty learning, my students in turn were leaning how to read, write, and solve math problems better.

CHAPTER 9

The Purchase

By now it had been about a year since my parents and I began searching to buy a house somewhere farther north in the city. The neighborhood on the south side wasn't where I wanted to spend the rest of my life. Finding a house was difficult because there were always three different opinions regarding the houses we had seen. We saw many homes located by Midway Airport, but one day while we were searching for a house, I had a terrible car accident. My mother ended up with a cracked rib, and I ended up with a ticket and a damaged car. Luckily, nothing happened to my father. At that point, we decided to cancel our search and wait for my mother to recuperate. I felt terrible about the accident and just hoped everything would soon turn out okay. As time passed, my sister and her husband decided to move up north by O'Hare International Airport. Their move to the far north side was a turning point in my life. When I went to visit the place where my sister and her husband had moved to, I realized that was the spot meant for my parents and me. We soon began to search

for a home, and within months we found the house of our dreams. As they say, sometimes things happen for a reason. Perhaps the accident was a blessing in disguise.

Within a couple of months, my parents and I moved to the far northwest side of Chicago, just minutes from O'Hare Airport. It had been a challenge for my parents to move out of the south side. Since my father was in his late sixties, he wasn't very happy about moving out of his old neighborhood. Moving from the far south side to the northwest side of Chicago meant he had to leave many old friends from the old neighborhood. Now he felt as though he were going to lose his friends he had met at the steel mill. He had never thought about that while we were searching for a house. I guess you can say he got cold feet. It was easier for me to convince my mother to move out. Although she had friends in the old neighborhood, she had no problem leaving them behind. It had taken us almost three years to find a home we all liked, but fortunately we found the house of our dreams. With some persuasion, I managed to convince my mother and father to move north of the city.

Once we moved to our new house, I loved living on the far northwest side of the city, especially by the airport. I had always wanted to live by the airport. I recalled watching the airplanes fly above my house when we lived on the south side of Chicago. Although the sky seemed so large, the planes flying over our home on the south side reminded me of birds. While growing up on the south side, I told my sister that one day I was going to live by the airport. Even though I didn't know where O'Hare Airport was, I always knew deep down in my heart that day would come true. Now I was

actually living my dream. As I heard and saw the planes fly over our new home, I knew God had been listening to my prayers. This was a new beginning for me. Not only had I found a new neighborhood, but I also found a place where I could go to the health club and do some exercises. Being able to attend the health club would help me get into shape. Once I became a member of the new health club, I was a loyal customer. I attended the health club three times a week in hopes of a better shape.

The neighborhood where we presently lived was so different compared to the one I had left on the south side. Besides having a great health club, the streets were clean, and the people were very friendly. I didn't have to worry about those dopey tenants from the far south side who dropped their cigarette butts on the walkway. If I had to clean our driveway, at least now there was a different task I had to do, which was sweeping our neighbor's pine tree needles. I couldn't understand how anyone could have five enormous pine trees located on his or her front lawn. I eventually ended up disliking those trees very much. At least the cigarette butts I used to pick up had disappeared from my life. The neighborhood where we had moved had a church down the block. Every Sunday I walked to church early in the mornings. One day as I was coming back from church, I suddenly got a glimpse of someone I thought was the most handsome guy in the world. How could this be? I had moved to the far northwest side of the city, and there in front of my face was Mr. America. He actually lived on the same street I had been so fortunate to move to. Months went by, and I didn't see him anymore. I eventually ended

up meeting his brother, and we became chatty neighbors. The month of June arrived, and I ended up being invited to my neighbor's party. I felt very happy I had a neighbor who was going to throw a party on my block.

Party day arrived, and I was ready to go and meet new people. Once I got to the party, I started meeting my neighbor's friends. Suddenly, I noticed the tall, blond man I had seen six months earlier on that Sunday coming while walking back from church. He was too good to be true, so I decided to ignore him. For some odd reason, he decided to come over and start up a conversation. As we talked, I noticed he brought up another person in the conversation. After listening to him talk about this person so much, I just assumed he was either married or engaged. In other words, he was taken, so I decided to ignore him. As the evening continued, it was time for me to go home. Before I knew it, the hunk I had just met was walking me home. Once we arrived at my house, I found myself being invited to a concert. At that point, I had no choice but to find out how "taken" this hunk was, who was taking the time to invite me out. I found out he wasn't married, so I accepted the invitation to go out with him. The following weekend arrived, and we eventually ended up going to the concert. As time went by, we seemed to become better friends. He was always coming over to my house. I started to realize I was beginning to like him more than just a friend. The only problem with that was his constant conversation about his ex-girlfriend. I just assumed that if he was taking the time to come over so much, he must not like his ex-girlfriend so much. Every time I saw him, I could almost feel my heart explode.

Nevertheless, it was the same old story. The one I was nuts about was always bringing his ex-girlfriend into the conversation. I remember going out with my cousin Martha or other friends to the local dances in search of a boyfriend. The more I tried to find Mr. Right, the less successful I was. Mr. Right was nowhere to be found. I thought that if I found someone else, perhaps I could forget the one who was breaking my heart. Although I met guys here and there, they were never the right ones. Things wouldn't work out between me and the ones I dated, so I left the matter up to destiny. As time passed, I didn't have to worry about having my neighbor on my block. Destiny removed him from my life when he and his mom moved away.

CHAPTER 10

Time to Move On

Time passed, and by now my sister had been married to Ralph for a couple of years. December came, and before we knew it, there was a new member in the family, Stephanie. She looked like my sister and Ralph. I remember when we first saw her at the hospital. She was the only baby who could manage to pick her upper torso up with her little arms and move her head from left to right when she was placed on her belly. I had never seen a baby do that. A couple of years went by, and my nephew, Andy, became part of the family. He was born in the month of May about two years after Stephanie had been born. I remember that month because it was the same month, I was to complete my master's as a reading specialist. My sister was very lucky to have my parents close by. They took care of Stephanie and Andy while my sister and Ralph worked. As time passed, both Stephanie and Andy became old enough to start going to school. My sister would drop them off by my parents' home. My mother took them to the school down the block. This routine continued until Danny, my youngest nephew,

was born a couple of years later. By then my mother was no longer able to care for all three grandchildren, so my sister and her husband hired Dorothy to care for their children while they worked. Dorothy was very nice and responsible with children.

One spring day, we were informed that my maternal grandmother had passed. My mother had to leave the country to attend my grandmother's wake and funeral. My father, my sister, her family, and I remained in Chicago. Within a week my mother returned to Chicago. We were all very sad with the death of my grandmother. By now both of my maternal grandparents had passed, and we soon realized it would be different returning to my mother's hometown. I remember when my grandfather was alive. He always told us that when both he and my grandmother passed away, everything would be different for my family should we ever decide to return to their home. When he said this, it was never clear what he meant. Time would only tell.

As the years went by, I began to get tired of driving so far to the same school where I had been hired as a teacher. In the winter months, it took me over an hour and a half to get to my destination. By then I was so miserable of the long commute that I didn't even want to teach. I started to look for another job closer to my house. As much as I searched, I was never lucky. I already had a master's degree in reading, but it didn't help me get a new job. Since my background was reading, I couldn't understand why nobody else would hire me. After all there had to be children somewhere out there who needed a reading teacher. Time passed, and it was now ten years since I had first been hired at the same job with no luck of moving

out. Principals would call me and offer me a job, but by the next day, they would mysteriously change their minds. I knew in my heart that it was time to move on to a new job. It was then that I decided to take the ultimate decision. I finally got the courage to leave the school, and I never went back there again. Leaving that job brought the best feeling I'd had in a long time. I was free at last. I may not have had a job at that moment, but at least nobody was going to stop me from getting what I wanted. a job closer to my house.

Two months went by, and I was hired for a temporary job working in a suburban public school until the end of that school year. I was hired as a teacher's aide, because there were no teaching positions available at that time. The job required that I teach Polish- and Spanish-speaking children English as a second language. By now I had obtained a master's degree in reading and an endorsement in bilingual education and one in teaching English as a second language (ESL). I enjoyed my job very much, because the students were willing to learn. They learned a lot in the short time I was there. The downside about the job was that I was doing the job of a teacher, yet I was getting the salary of a teacher's aide. By the end of that school year, I was offered the same job, which was that of a teacher's aide until they got the funds to hire me as a teacher. Although I liked my job, I didn't accept the offer. I wanted to keep my ten years of seniority I had worked so hard for with the Chicago Board of Education. I wasn't planning to continue being paid the salary of an aide while knowing I had a master's degree in education. Besides, if I didn't return to work for the Chicago Board of Education, I would eventually end up losing those ten years of seniority. I knew there was a

good chance I had to work extra years wherever I would be outside the Chicago Board of Education. So I declined the job offer in the suburbs and concentrated on looking for a job with the Chicago Public Schools.

It was now the summer of 1990. I returned to Mexico for the last time with my parents. Since both of my maternal grandparents had passed away, my aunt Neva and her husband were now living in my grandparents' home. My parents and I decided to remain there for a short time. The feeling was different now that my grandparents had died. The house didn't feel the same as before. Whenever we had gone to my grandparents' home in previous years, it always felt as though we were at home. Now we felt like strangers. It was then that I recalled the words my grandfather had used before he died. Their home wouldn't be the same once they would pass. After a week and a half, we decided to return to Chicago. The place that had felt like home at one time now had a cold feeling. We didn't feel comfortable in the home that was now in the hands of my aunt and uncle. We soon returned to Chicago, and life continued as usual.

That summer was almost over, and I hadn't found a job within the Chicago Board of Education yet. The good thing, however, was that I was called to be an extra in a movie. This time the movie was *Backdraft*. By now I had been an extra for many summers, mostly during the month of August. Every time the month of August arrived, I knew my casting director would call me for a movie being filmed in Chicago. I had been an extra in the following movies: *Red Heat*, *She's Having a Baby*, *Curley Sue*, *Opportunity Knocks*, *The Music Box*, and countless others. Unfortunately, I was

always on the cutting board. There were very few movies I could actually say I saw myself in. If I did get to see myself, it was only for a split second. This summer, however, was different. Being an extra was exciting, but my focus was on finding a teaching job with the Chicago Board of Education. While I was an extra on the set of *Backdraft*, I met a teacher who told me there was a teaching position available at her school. How lucky could I have been? The school was only minutes away from my house. When I arrived at my house, I immediately called the principal and made an appointment to meet with him. Before I knew it, I had a job within walking distance from my house.

September arrived, and I started to work at the new school near my house. The new job lasted roughly two months before I found out I would be there only on a part-time basis. There weren't enough Spanish bilingual children in that entire school for me to be there full-time. I eventually ended up having to go to two schools to make up for a full-time position. That year turned out to be awful. Although the principal at the first school liked me, there were too many politics involved. I soon realized the Local School Council, made up of school staff members and parents, wanted their friend, the ESL teacher, to remain there. Members of the Chicago Board of Education informed me that I should remain there. However, I decided to leave and go to the other school where I had been a part-time teacher. My position became full-time at the second school, so I took it and left. I remained in that school until the following year. I eventually transferred to Hanson Park School where I continued to teach until I retired from the Chicago Board of Education.

CHAPTER 11

Reviewing the Letter

By now two years had passed since I was been to Mexico. My aunt Neva, my mother's oldest sister; and her husband, Quique, passed away, and the house in which my grandparents had lived for such a long time was sold. It was around that year when I decided it was time for me to leave my parents' home and buy my own house. I thought I should start becoming more independent and not rely so much on my parents. I eventually found the house I could afford and moved out. The house I bought wasn't big. It looked like a doll house. It was big enough for me and my stuff to fit in. There was a bedroom, a kitchen, and a living room on the first floor and two bedrooms upstairs, which was really the attic in disguise. Although I had moved away, the house I bought was just a couple of blocks away from my parents' home. I felt as though I were still living at home, since I stopped by to visit them every day.

During one of my visits to my parents' home, my mother was looking through her stuff. She decided to show me the same letter her father had written to her back in 1979. I

remember my astonishment as I read the letter regarding her father's tenacity in finding the truth about his birth date and at the same time his desire to obtain his mother's birth certificate. As I read the letter, I noticed that my grandfather had died nine months after he discovered the actual date of his birth day. It was then that I realized that, because of his sudden death, he had been unable to fulfill one of his dreams, which was to obtain his mother's birth certificate. That's when I decided I had to do something to fulfill his dream. By now years had passed since I had first been hired as a teacher. I no longer had to worry about the students I once had, who were having a difficult time learning how to read. Since I already had a master's degree in reading, I could teach children successfully, so I felt this was the time for me to concentrate on the search for my great-grandmother's birth certificate.

During the summer of 1992, I decided to take the first steps to obtain my great-grandmother's birth certificate. Maybe this would lead me to discover where past family members had really come from. For years I had wondered about this. Both of my grandparents had told my sister and me that their ancestors came from Spain. Because many past family members had died at an early age, relatives who were still alive didn't have enough information to answer that question. Now was the time to seek the data regarding my great-grandmother's birth certificate and learn where we had come from. Living in a house that looked like a doll house, I sat in my tiny kitchen as I initiated my search. Not knowing the exact town where my great-grandmother had been born, I chose to call churches in towns located closest

to the border of the United States and Mexico. It was a very difficult process for me, because I didn't know the names of the parishes located in those towns. Besides, if they had the Internet back then, I had no clue since I wasn't proficient in computers. I began by calling a town named Sabinas, Coahuila, Mexico. I assumed the operators who worked in that town might be able to give me the names of their local churches. When they gave me that information and their telephone numbers, the effort was to no avail. The personnel who worked in the parishes I had chosen to call couldn't give me any information regarding my great-grandmother's birth certificate. There was another problem I had to confront, which was the amount of money I could afford to spend on calls. After all, I was living on only a teacher's salary. There were bills to pay, not to mention a mortgage, so I had to limit my phone calls to Mexico if I wanted to continue living in my house. After calling many parishes in the northern state of Coahuila, Mexico, that summer, my calls eventually had to end. Not having a computer in my house made my search more difficult. Besides that, I didn't know whether there were websites related to genealogy that would help me find what I was looking for, so I relied on the help of people who worked in parishes located in the northern state of Mexico.

CHAPTER 12

Biskit, My Rabbit

Besides focusing on the calls to Mexico, there were other things I had to concentrate on. One thing was learning my lines for my acting classes, and the other was caring for my pet rabbit, Biskit. I remember going to my parents' home one hot summer day. My sister was visiting my parents when my father came up to us and mentioned he had found something in the backyard. We went outside to see what it was, and it was none other than "a giant Dutch rabbit." It was the biggest bunny I had ever seen. Since it didn't have a collar or anything to identify him, we just assumed it didn't have an owner, so my father decided to give me the bunny. We waited for about a month to see whether anyone would claim the bunny, but as time went by, nobody did, so I decided to keep him for myself. I didn't know what to name him. My niece, Stephanie, decided we should call him Biskit after a character in a book my sister used to read to her. My bunny, Biskit, was very smart. He looked like the opposite of a skunk's appearance. He was white and had a

long, black stripe running down his back. He had two black eyes and two long black ears that stuck up like antennae.

The day after I got the bunny, my parents and I went to the pet store and bought him a big cage. I put Biskit inside the new cage in my tiny kitchen. He was so smart that within days, I trained him to go potty inside the cage. I didn't like leaving him caged in all day long, so I allowed him to roam around the kitchen. Once it was time for him to do his business, he hopped into the cage and did so. Afterward he just hopped back out and sat on the kitchen floor. Having a rabbit taught me something I hadn't known about these creatures. They could be very stinky. I had to make sure his cage was always clean; otherwise the smell was so bad I had to hold my nose until his living quarters were taken care of. Once it was summer, I decided Biskit could no longer share my kitchen. I decided he had to move into the garage. I had a two-car garage and owned only one car, so there was plenty of room for my rabbit to sleep and run as he wished inside the garage. I kept the garage windows open; therefore, the garage was always cool, especially at night. During the day Biskit loved playing in my backyard. When it was time for him to go inside the garage, he waited by the big garage door while I pressed on the Genie garage door opener. Once he saw the door go up, he ran inside and turned around, as if he were looking to see whether I was looking at him. Seeing him go toward the back of the garage, I pressed the Genie, and the door went down. I knew my bunny was safe inside the garage, and my house was free from any bunny fragrance. As fall approached, the weather began to change, and it was time for Biskit to come in and borrow my kitchen until the next spring.

During one summer day, while I was taking a course in film at Columbia College, I got up early to let Biskit out of the garage. I decided to take a quick shower while Biskit was running around, enjoying the summer sun. After I took a quick shower, I decided to see how Biskit was doing. I couldn't see him anywhere from my kitchen window. I ran outside and looked everywhere. There was no stone in my backyard I hadn't turned over. I didn't care what size that stone was; I had the expectation that maybe Biskit could be under one of them, even if the stone looked like a pebble. Time went by, and I had to accept it. Either he had decided to run away by choice or some creep had stolen him. I was so depressed that I didn't want to know about my film class or about any calls from my casting director to be an extra in any movie. The only thing on my mind was getting my rabbit back. I decided I had to start praying to St. Francis and hope Biskit would one day return. At the same time all this was going on, I continued to make calls to parishes located in the northern state of Coahuila, Mexico, hoping to find my great-grandmother's birth certificate. Yet my calls all came to the same conclusion: nobody had any information related to my great-grandmother's birth certificate.

A week went by, and as usual I got up and went to the window to see whether Biskit had returned. One morning after taking a quick shower, I decided to take my garbage out and dump it in the large garbage containers. I couldn't believe my eyes. My rabbit, Biskit, who had been missing for exactly one week, had either returned on his own or perhaps had been returned by some creep who had stolen him in the first place. When I first laid my eyes on him, he

didn't look the same. He looked quite thinner, but I knew it was Biskit. As soon as I raised that garage door, Biskit ran inside. For the next weeks, I fed him as much as I could so he could gain his weight back. I also took him to the vet to reassure myself that nothing bad had happened to him other than weight loss. Whatever had happened to him, Biskit was now a different bunny. He didn't seem to enjoy being in the backyard as much. It was as though he were afraid of someone. Now I had to be more careful with my bunny, for I didn't want to lose him again.

Each summer the process was the same thing. I continued to call different churches in Mexico in search of my great-grandmother's birth certificate, but the results were the same. Nobody had any information related to her birth certificate. It was now my fourth year since I had first obtained Biskit. He continued to be my loyal pet bunny. One Sunday afternoon I decided to go out with my parents. When we returned, I went to see how my Biskit was doing. When I saw him, he didn't look right. I knew there was something wrong, and of course it had to be a Sunday afternoon when most vets aren't in their offices. I called an emergency number for animals, and I was told to take him in for a checkup. When I arrived at the emergency hospital for animals, the first thing I noticed was a tombstone the hospital was advertising. I suddenly got a chill and had a very uneasy feeling. I took Biskit out of the car and went into the emergency hospital. As soon as they checked his gums, they took him into another room and told me it was too late. Everything was happening too soon. Before I knew it, the rabbit I had taken care of for four years had died. I

was devastated. I hadn't expected this to happen. I asked them to return my rabbit's body and headed back home. The next day I took Biskit's body to his vet, who had taken care of him for the past four years, and had him cremated. Meanwhile, since I was taking an acting class, I realized how hard it was for me to concentrate on my lines and at the same time get into character, knowing my bunny had just died. Life, however, must go on, and I had to get over it, even if it hurt.

As the summer continued, I kept making calls to Mexico in search of my great-grandmother's information. Although I hadn't been able to obtain the information I was seeking, I called different places seeking answers, but the results were the same. Time passed, and I had to return to work. I missed my rabbit, Biskit so much I decided to buy another pet. This time I named my next rabbit Lily. Lily was quite unusual. Although her body grew like a normal bunny, her head didn't seem to grow. I thought Lily would be like Biskit. To my surprise the only similarity between Lily and Biskit was the fact that she was a rabbit. I was never able to train her to go potty in her cage. When I would let her out, she would chase me around the house, because she wanted to bite me. Although I had her for about a year, she wasn't the friendliest bunny. She always seemed to be mad. I remember one day a friend I was dating at the time came over to my house. He decided to become friendly with my vampire bunny, so he stuck his finger through the cage to greet her. Within seconds Lily took a quick turn and almost chopped off that finger. Had he not pulled his finger out of the cage in time, he would have gone home with two thumbs and

seven fingers instead of the eight. For the next few months, I took care of Lily, but she never became friendly. She was always mad, so I kept my distance. One morning after taking a shower, I heard a loud screeching noise coming from the kitchen. I rushed to see what was happening; apparently Lily was trying to tell me she was dying. Within minutes she took her last breath and died. It was sad seeing her die, so I took a break from having any more pets for a year.

CHAPTER 13

Becoming Citizens

Many decades had passed since my parents immigrated to the United States. For a long time, my sister and I had insisted that my parents become US citizens. They both ignored our pleas until we finally convinced them that becoming citizens didn't mean they were turning their backs on their native country. It meant only that they were becoming citizens of a country that had welcomed them and was providing them with many opportunities for a better life. Once they agreed to become citizens, my sister and I obtained the necessary information my parents needed to become citizens. We helped them study for the exam they were to pass to become citizens. I remember my sister went over the information my father had to learn so he could pass the exam. It wasn't so difficult for my mother since she was the kind of person who just needed to go over her material once or twice, and she learned it. It was different for my father now that he was in his eighties. It was more difficult for him to recall what he had learned; however, by reviewing the material, my father was able to

retain the information. In 1997 my parents went through all the procedures they needed to do to become citizens of the United States. That was an event that not only made my parents proud; it also made my sister and me happy. After years of insisting, they were finally citizens of this country.

Four years went by since my parents became citizens. We now started to notice a change in my father's behavior. Since he loved going to the shopping mall for a little while, he took the neighborhood bus to the stores. It was then that my mother got calls that he had forgotten to get off the bus at the correct corner stop. A couple of times the neighborhood police brought him home, because he was disoriented and didn't know where he was. He began to experience a hard time at night when he tried to go to sleep. Instead of sleeping, my father spent the night pacing the hall. His pacing prevented my mother from getting a good night's sleep. I recall how much my mother complained about not getting enough sleep, because of my father's pacing. Then there were times when my parents and I went to the grocery store. My mother and I had to look for my father, because he was nowhere to be found. We ultimately found him at his favorite restaurant down the street, having a piece of pie and coffee.

Occasionally we went to a store, and my father wanted to take something without paying for it, because he was convinced it belonged to him. After telling him many times that the item didn't belong to him, he eventually let go of the object but not without an argument. As time continued, the situation became worse until one day when I noticed my father was staring into space. I went up to him and waved my hand in front of his face, but there was no reaction on his

part. At that time, I didn't think much about the incident; I just assumed he was in deep thought. This happened two more times until one day when my sister and I decided to take him to the doctor. That was when we found out he had previously had three mini strokes. He spent a short time in rehabilitation, but by now it was necessary for him to remain in a wheelchair. Although it was difficult to see him in that condition, it was a blessing in disguise for my mother. By now my father wasn't able to walk on his own, so his pacing during the nights stopped. My mother was finally able to sleep better. Shortly after that, we discovered my father was developing Alzheimer's. Alzheimer's is a disease that involves the entire family when it hits home. I remember some of the symptoms my father had, which were unknown to my family. He constantly repeated stories or forgot that my mother had just given him his breakfast, lunch, or dinner. He always said he was hungry, because my mother hadn't fed him. As years passed, his condition became only worse. For some years, I had wanted to buy another home and sell the one I had; however I knew my mother needed me. I decided to remain in my tiny home until things changed.

CHAPTER 14

New Pets

Time went by, and one day my principal, Ms. Stoll, asked me whether I was interested in having a new pet. A teacher's daughter was getting married and was going to have to give her pet rabbit away. I didn't know what to say, but before I knew it, I had a new rabbit in my house. This time his name was Trixie. I was beginning to wonder about myself. Why did I always end up with a rabbit? Trixie was very different from Lilly. He was gentle and enjoyed being around me. However, he had a bad habit. Whenever I was about to sit on the floor, Trixie dashed to the spot where I was about to sit before I got there. I couldn't understand why he did that. I just assumed that was what he did with his previous owner.

At that time I was busy taking more acting classes. For homework, we were supposed to observe ourselves on an old-fashioned DVD the instructor had taped and comment on our performance. I remember being in my living room one evening and putting the DVD on. As I was watching my performance on the DVD, I went to sit on the floor, but before

I knew it, Trixie had rushed to my spot. To my shock, I heard a loud crunch. I was devastated. I couldn't believe I had sat on my rabbit's head. I quickly got up, but by then it was too late. My rabbit looked like an alien. His face was all contorted, and I was in shock. I didn't know what to do. I felt horrible. I had just hurt my beloved bunny's head. Suddenly, my rabbit shook his head from side to side, and his face went back to its original shape. However, I soon realized his jaw was broken, because when I tried feeding him, the poor thing just sat in the corner and wouldn't do anything. I decided I had to do something.

The next morning I rushed him to my vet, who specialized in rabbits. I was used to going to her with the previous bunnies. The vet said she couldn't do anything for him since I had broken his jaw. I was so upset; I just took my bunny back home and did what I could to feed him. I bought baby food and decided to feed him with a doll's bottle. Because he was so gentle, my bunny allowed me to do so. I prayed to St. Francis for his help, and within time my bunny recovered from his injury. When I returned to my vet, she was shocked that my rabbit had recovered. She was sure Trixie wouldn't survive. Fortunately, my pet rabbit was able to live a normal life for the next two years, but all pets eventually passed away. It was very strange when my rabbit Trixie died. I remember I was on my way home from school that day. Before going home, I planned to do some errands, but for some strange reason, I felt I had to go straight home. When I arrived, my bunny was by the sofa. Within minutes he let out a loud noise and died. It was as if he were just waiting for me to get home so he could die. By now I decided not to get any rabbits for pets.

It was now the year 2001. As in every summer, I sought ways to get information related to my great-grandmother's birth certificate. I was beginning to run out of churches to call. There were times when I called the same parishes I had previously called, hoping to get someone else who could help me with the information I was looking for. As always, the answer was the same. Nobody knew where or when my great-grandmother had been born. He or she couldn't find any records of her.

Fall arrived, and Thanksgiving was approaching.

I remember being in school one autumn day. As the minutes passed, the school bell rang, and children rushed through the corridors to exit the school building. Once they had left, I found myself heading toward the office. There was no time to waste. I had to seek some peace and quiet. I had just spent six hours with twenty-eight second-grade students. While walking through the hall on that cloudy autumn afternoon, I caught a glimpse of a small basket placed in the corner. Curious to know what was inside, I reached in and saw a couple of puppies seeking comfort in a warm blanket wrapped around their tiny bodies. Finding them so irresistible, I took one in my hands and held him close to me. I could feel his tiny heartbeat as his little head turned to find his mother. After holding the tiny bundle in my hands for just a few minutes, I decided to return him to his place of comfort. As I approached the office, I noticed a little furry creature on top of the secretary's desk. Once I got to the office, I saw a tiny puppy from the same litter wiggling on top of the secretary's desk. I thought he was the cutest little thing I had ever seen. His fur was white and tan,

and he had the most beautiful big, brown eyes. I wanted to hold him, but because he was on the secretary's desk, I just assumed she wanted the puppy for herself. He was so irresistible that I decided to pet him. At first, he was a little feisty. Every time I reached for him, he snapped at me like a snapping turtle. When I was finally able to hold him in my hands and put him against my chest, he quickly adjusted to my body as though he were hugging me. I could hear the echoes of my coworkers as they pleaded with me to keep this puppy. I could feel his heartbeat as he wiggled his tiny nose toward my face. The school secretary even suggested that I name him Shakespeare, since my hobby was taking so many acting classes.

A couple of teachers were in the office and insisted that I buy the little puppy. Since purchasing a puppy wasn't in my plan, I couldn't decide what to do. The time finally arrived for me to make the big decision. Should I buy this puppy and make him part of my life? That was my dilemma. Listening to those echoes pleading with me to take him home, I finally decided that buying him might be the best idea. Nevertheless, I had one important thing to do, and that was to get the "dowry" of \$300 to pay for his departure from his family. Before leaving the office, my principal, Ms. Stoll, decided to polish one of the doggie's toenails. As I headed to the bank, I could feel my heartbeat, and my hands begin to sweat. Was I really making the right decision? After all, I had never owned a pet other than three bunnies, who had died within a couple of years. As soon as I had the money in my hands, I headed to the puppy's home to pick him up. On the way there, I kept wondering whether anyone else may

have taken him by mistake. Once I arrived at my destination and paid the owner of the puppies for Shakespeare, she gave him to me. I quickly checked his paws to see whether one of his nails had been polished. Fortunately, nobody had taken the puppy I intended to buy, and off we went to my house.

I decided to head to my sister's home once I had purchased my new little dog. Shakespeare seemed to be well received. Everyone was happy with the new arrival. When I was done visiting my sister and her family, I went to my parents' house. When we arrived there, I could sense the cold aura coming from my mother's body as she saw the tiny, furry creature. She had always told me, "No dogs in the house." I quickly put him down on the carpet and let him become accustomed to the new environment. To my surprise, the shy and frightened puppy I had just purchased magically acquired a sense of self-possession as his tiny body touched the carpet. Within minutes I noticed a change. As he began to sniff his surroundings, he started to take control of the floor. Suddenly all I could see was a tiny flash of fur dashing through the rooms. It was as though he had just become the owner of his new environment. Suddenly, I became worried. Had I made the right decision? Now that my parents' floor had suddenly become a convenient race track for Shakespeare, I could feel the blood rushing through my body. Thoughts passed through my mind as I pondered my most recent purchase. I had no other choice but to depart and go home. By the time we arrived at my home, it was time to put him to bed, but what bed? Dogs don't have beds, or do they? I decided to have him sleep in the kitchen, since it was nice and warm there. I put a gate

by the wall and made a cozy corner for my new house guest. Much to my surprise, this cozy corner I had prepared wasn't to his liking. I felt like I had just adopted a newborn child. The puppy I had just purchased cried like a baby nonstop. I couldn't understand why he was so uncomfortable. The following morning, I went to school and shared my problem with a coworker. Her suggestion was that perhaps my pet missed his family. Not having thought of that, I decided to buy him a crate and let him sleep in my bedroom. That seemed to work, because his crying suddenly ceased.

During the first couple of nights after I purchased Shakespeare, I remember having to go outside at all hours of the night just to get Shakespeare accustomed to going potty. How I dreaded going out on those chilly nights. As I walked the tiny puppy outside, I remembered all the times I used to make fun of all those fools who thought they were masters of their dogs as they walked them through the cold, dreary streets of Chicago. I regarded the masters as none other than their dogs. Little did I know that within a couple of years, I too would be that fool, and the master would be none other than Shakespeare as I walked him outside. Luckily for us, within a week or two, Shakespeare learned that the bathroom was outside. All it took was one bark at the door, and off he went to do his duty in my backyard. Fortunately, I had a fenced-in backyard. Otherwise I had to stand outside on cold winter nights, waiting for Shakespeare to take care of his business.

As the weeks went by, Shakespeare became more adapted to my mother's house. His nose became more attached to the scent of homemade food. While his nose followed the

scent of food on the table, so did the rest of his body. I remember once when I went into my mother's dining room to discover none other than Shakespeare calmly walking on top of the table and seeking to please his nose and his taste buds. I quickly removed him from the table before my mother saw him and accepted the fact that it was time to take Shakespeare to "puppy boot camp."

I made arrangements and took him for training, which lasted two weeks. Those two weeks seemed to stretch throughout eternity. I was worried that perhaps my dog may experience some sort of mistreatment. After all, he hadn't been away from me since I purchased him. Impatiently waiting for his return, the final day arrived, and Shakespeare was finally going home. When I arrived at puppy boot camp, I was surprised by Shakespeare's change. He was a new dog. Now that he was finally going home, it was time for me, and only me, to be in control. There were no more excuses as to why my dog had to wander across the table, seeking to please his snout. The early mornings arrived, and there I was, ready to take Shakespeare for a walk. It took us ten minutes to go around the block before I left for work. Once we were in the house and it was time for me to leave, Shakespeare ran to the door and blocked the exit, because he didn't want me to leave. I thought my dog was going nuts. How could a dog prevent his owner from leaving her castle? Much to my surprise, I found out why he wanted me to stay. He didn't want to be left alone. As much as I disliked leaving my friend alone, I found no other alternative but to get him accustomed to the idea that I had to work while he got to stay at home and wag his tail.

Spring soon arrived, and so did Shakespeare's new front teeth. At that time, I didn't know puppies like children lost their baby teeth. While I was planting spring flowers in my garden, I recall hearing a funny noise coming from Shakespeare and seeing some blood by his teeth. I decided to take him to the vet. Much to my surprise, I was told that he had just lost a tooth or two. To this day, I don't know whether dogs lose all their teeth since I never saw more blood by his snout. Shakespeare was growing fast, and so was his fur. I remember asking a friend of mine where I could take my furry companion for a groom. Within days Shakespeare was introduced to a pair of shears, and they took a trip through his fur. I could hear him growling as he demonstrated his opposition to his grooming. Oh, how we dreaded going to the groomer. While Shakespeare rejected getting groomed, I sensed the receptionist's dislike toward us. A few more trips to that groomer, and the journey finally ended. I decided not to go back there, and I searched for another grooming place, one where the employee wasn't a grumpy, old witch at the grooming salon. As I experimented with various salons, there were those that left Shakespeare looking like an alien from another planet.

Searching for the right groomer for my dog was like searching for a treasure. It took a couple of trips before we hit the right one. At last I felt comfortable going to someone who could cut his hair without making him look like an extraterrestrial. Having found a good groomer made me think my worries were all over. Unfortunately, I was wrong. I recall taking Shakespeare out for a poop walk and noticing he was starting to go for his poop. It was the most

awful thing I had seen. How could a puppy like to eat his own poop? I recall buying some stuff that was supposed to chase dogs away from their poop, but nothing seemed to work. Whenever I took Shakespeare out, I ended up in a race. Who got to his poop faster? Would it be Shakespeare or me? He, of course, wanted it for dessert while I wanted it for the doggy poop bag. It took some time and several races, but fortunately he was soon over that phase.

CHAPTER 15

A Change of Scene

Spring arrived, and I was invited to go to Vegas with some teacher friends. The whole idea seemed to be great except the matter of who would take care of my Shakespeare. Well, luckily my sister and her family volunteered to take care of him. Spring break arrived, and off I went to Vegas. The trip was only for a few days, just enough to have a great time. I hadn't been there before, so everything in the area looked beautiful. There were lots of shows to see, but unfortunately there wasn't as much money in our pockets to afford to see hardly any shows. We basically visited the casinos, even though I am not one who knows how to gamble. I hardly won any money when I did decide to gamble. My big win was about fifteen dollars in nickels. I remember feeling as though I had hit the jackpot, simply because I had never won any money before.

Then there was the crossing episode. I remember my friend and I were on our way to one of the casinos. While we were standing by the curb my friend told me to cross the street. I didn't think that was a good idea; I thought we

should wait for all the traffic to pass. She kept insisting that we cross, so off we went to the opposite side of the street. We didn't even get our feet off the curb when suddenly I heard a boom. That's when I saw a body on the street. It was my friend, who had tripped. As I turned and saw her on the ground, I immediately noticed a row of cars heading toward us like race cars. I didn't know whether to run or help her up. I knew that if I tried to help her up, I would have ended up falling on the street, since she was much taller and heavier than I. Luckily, she was able to get up in time as the moving cars slowed down. My friend and I made it safely across the street and were able to go into one of the casinos. Once we were inside, the employees helped my friend, since she was all scratched up from the fall.

Other than that incident, Las Vegas was great. The shows were awesome, the climate was just right, and the hotels and food were out of this world, but unfortunately it was time for us to face reality. We had to return to our normal lives. When I returned to Chicago, the first thing I did was pick up my dog. Both Shakespeare and I were happy to see each other, and off we went to my house. Classes resumed for the students, and I was back to my regular routine, while Shakespeare remained home, wagging his tail.

By now, the teachers and students had roughly nine weeks left before the school year was over. As summer approached, I began to make my routine calls to Mexico in search of my great-grandmother's birth certificate. However, the result was always the same. People on the other end of the phone were unable to give me the information I sought. I began to feel frustrated, unable to get ahold of someone

who could help. Although my frustration grew, I didn't want to go back to Mexico. If I did, I wouldn't know where to go to obtain the information I was looking for. To top it off, I had never even thought of calling anyone in the state of Saltillo, the capital of Coahuila. When you call a foreign country, it's very difficult to know how that country retains information like what I was looking for, especially when I had no idea how to do that kind of search.

As the month of August arrived, the calls for me to be an extra in movies continued. I was usually called to be an extra in one or two movies per summer. I got all excited whenever I got calls for a job as an extra. Even though I had to get up extremely early, have extra clothes available, and spend hours on the set, those things never bothered me. I enjoyed doing it as a hobby. September arrived, and it was time to return to work; thus my work as an extra came to an end. One evening I was called to be in an audition for a commercial. I was very excited, because this seemed better than just being an extra in a movie or commercial. The day arrived, and I went to the location where the commercial was to be filmed. When my name was called, I went in and followed the producer's instructions. Being able to follow the young lady's directions didn't affect my performance. I just felt like I did a great job and returned home. Days passed, and to my surprise, I was called back, because the director liked what I had done. The day of the audition arrived. I hurried to my destination, hoping everything would turn out okay. When I arrived at the audition location, I sat quietly and waited for my name to be called. Once it was my turn to go in, I expected to see the same young lady who

had previously given me the directions. But when I walked in, all I remember was seeing Mr. Universe sitting next to the camera, giving me directions on what to do. Suddenly, my heart went boom, and my concentration went blank. I couldn't think about what Mr. Universe was telling me. All I could feel was my heart beating as fast as it could, and my hands begin to sweat. He was the most handsome person I had ever seen. Obviously, my concentration at that point wasn't on what the director was telling me to do but on his appearance. As you can imagine, I was a flop and went home. Unfortunately, I was never called back, but this wasn't to my shock. That's when I decided to sign up for acting classes. I thought if I were to become trained in the field of acting, these classes would prevent me from having a heart attack if I saw another Mr. Universe as a director.

I signed up taking improv classes at The Second City Theater in Chicago, because I knew improv classes would come in handy if I wanted to take any acting classes. I continued to take classes there until I decided to leave. I eventually went to another place, where I was so fortunate as to meet Josephine Forsberg, the best acting teacher I could ever have had. There was something about her that made me feel at ease. I continued to take acting and improv classes at different locations in the Chicago area. I was never called back for any more auditions, but that didn't matter. I was having the time of my life taking acting and improv classes while I worked as a teacher. I purchased and read many books related to acting, which helped me learn how to get into character for whatever scene I would be part of in plays. This lasted about ten years. As the time passed, there

were times I contemplated whether I was a teacher or an actress, since I had been involved so much in acting. Little by little I began to distance myself from acting. I had too many years invested in my career as a teacher. I didn't want to give up my teaching job or my future pension. I believed that if I wanted to be successful in acting, I would eventually have to go to either Los Angeles or New York, and that was something I unfortunately lacked the courage to do.

CHAPTER 16

A Trip across the Big Pond

Springtime arrived, and my sister, Lulu, invited me to spend two weeks with her and Andy, my nephew, in London and Ireland once summer break arrived. I immediately said yes, and before I knew it, I was packing up for the trip across the Atlantic Ocean. In the meantime, I had to get my passport ready and go to the bank to obtain foreign money, since I was going to spend time outside the country. Although I had spent many summers going to Mexico as a child, this time it felt different. Not only was I going to go out of the country, but I was going to fly across the ocean. Weeks passed, and it was time for us to visit London. My dog, Shakespeare, went to stay with my parents while my sister, Andy, and I departed to London and Ireland. When we arrived in London, I could hardly believe I was there. I didn't know which way to turn. The buildings were so much different in structure compared to those I was used to seeing in Chicago. My sister had been to London before,

so she guided my nephew, Andy, and I around the city. The weather felt cooler, and it was rainier than Chicago. Luckily, I had warm clothes to wear; otherwise I would have felt very uncomfortable.

We were in London and Ireland for approximately ten days. When we visited Westminster Abbey, we saw the tombstones of many kings and queens of England, including those of Charles Dickens and Laurence Olivier. When I saw their tombstones, I assumed if I touched Laurence Olivier's tombstone, his energy might enter my body, and somehow I would become a better actress. Well, so much for that idea. Later that day we saw Big Ben, a beautiful construction that houses an enormous clock and has a bell with chimes one can hear for miles. We took a boat ride on the Thames River and saw the London Eye, an enormous Ferris wheel. Although the London Eye offers a great viewing point of London, neither my sister nor I had any intention of seeing London from so high above. The next day we visited Parliament Square and passed in front of Buckingham Palace, where we saw the changing of the guard, and the Royal Mews. We were also able to see the most beautiful coaches I had ever seen. Later we ventured on to Piccadilly Market, where people could buy all sorts of crafts and food.

When visiting Covent Garden, a place where they had so much to see, it was then that I noticed British people also have different dialects from each other as Americans do. I always assumed all British people had the same accent or dialect. Little did I know they too have accents that define what area they are from, just as Americans do. Later we went to the British Museum. We saw the Rosetta stone. This is an

enormous stone with information written in Egyptian hieroglyphics, Greek, and Coptic languages, none of which I could decipher. We also observed many Egyptian mummies, beautiful sculptures of the Parthenon, and the Mexican Gallery. The Mexican Gallery brought back memories of my parents' native land. The following day, we visited the Tower of London. It houses precious crowns and jewels. I was so fascinated by all the jewels and crowns they had. I decided to get in line twice just to observe all the majestic things they had on display. I just presumed this may be my one and only time to see so much beauty.

Once we left the Tower, we walked down the busy streets of London. I didn't know which way to turn. There were so many beautiful stores to see. Then there was Hyde Park. It was so enchanting with so many beautiful flower gardens decorating the landscape. Harrods store was another place my sister, my nephew, and I decided to visit. As we took the escalators down, I will never forget seeing the most beautiful portrait of Lady Diana. Harrods was a beautiful store to visit.

Days passed, and it was time to go to Ireland. When we arrived at our destination, I had never seen so much green land in my life. The houses were so neat with such colorful doors people had as their main entrances. I had never seen so many beautiful front doors. The landscape was out of this world. I couldn't imagine how the land could have so many shades of green within such short distances. A couple of days later, we were able to visit Dublin. The first place we visited was St. Patrick's Cathedral. It was one of the most beautiful cathedrals I had ever seen. Later that day, we went

to a farm where they raised sheep. I had never seen so many sheep in my life, nor had I ever been so close to them. The Ring of Kerry was beautiful to see. As the bus drove alongside so many green rolling hills, we were able to see Ireland's beautiful coastline. We were also able to visit the Cliffs of Moher. Unfortunately that day was very cloudy and drizzly. When we arrived at the cliffs, I didn't want to get too close to them for fear of accidentally falling and not returning to my hometown of Chicago. I decided to play it safe and kept my distance. I noticed they didn't sell lots of potato chips or gum while we were in Ireland. I guess this was a good thing, because it helped me lose weight.

Days passed, and it was time to return to London. The day we arrived in London, my sister, my nephew, and I decided to walk down Abbey Road Crossing. Andy, my nephew, did his famous stretch across the Abbey Road Crossing as did the Beatles many years ago. While we were in London, we walked along a couple of beautiful streets that had the most elegant stores I had ever seen in my life. One store was none other than Selfridges. I was amazed to see so much elegance even if I knew I couldn't afford anything there. Eventually it was time to return to Chicago, and although it was bittersweet to leave, I was happy we had a safe trip.

Upon our arrival to Chicago, the first thing I noticed was the lack of greenery in our landscape. That summer seemed to have started out a bit dry, and unfortunately it showed in our landscape. Had I not experienced the trip to London and Ireland, I wouldn't have noticed the difference in our backdrop. As soon as I returned home, I was happy

to see both of my parents and Shakespeare, who had spent my vacation days at my parents' home. As the days passed, I noticed how unattractive my mother's garden was, so I got to work and tried to make her garden look like an English one. It took a while for the garden to change, but at least for now, it had a new look—not quite the look of an English or Irish garden, but at least it was more attractive.

The beginning of a new school year was upon us, and I took the opportunity to share what I had experienced with my students. Not having had the opportunity to travel out of this country, the children I was teaching were now being given a chance to learn things about two places in another part of the world. They learned a bit about the land and money used in England and Ireland. Through the use of pictures, they saw how the streets in London and Dublin differed compared to the streets in Chicago. The children also saw pictures of castles and crowns, something they had never seen before. Not only was I able to learn a little about England and Ireland, but I was also able to share what I had learned with those I taught.

CHAPTER 17

Passing Away

Months went by, and my family experienced the unfortunate death of my father. He had been sick for almost seven years. I remember going to my parents' house on New Year's Eve of 2002. When I went to check up on my father, he didn't look very good. I suggested to my mother that we take him to the hospital, but she insisted that he was fine. For some reason, my mother was afraid that if we took my father to the hospital, he would die there. Since she didn't want my father to go to the hospital, I decided to go to Jewel and buy some shrimp for a party I was planning to attend. As I searched for the shrimp, I heard my cell phone ring. It was my sister telling me that my father had to be rushed to the hospital. I returned the food I was planning to buy and concentrated on a more important matter, which was to get to the hospital as soon as possible. Within minutes I arrived to where my father had been taken. While my mother, my sister, and her family were in the waiting room, the doctors told my family my father didn't have long to live. Having been through this before

with my father, I didn't believe the doctors, because my father always managed to pull through. As the hours passed, I decided to return to my home, check on Shakespeare, and let him out for a toilet break. Once I arrived home and let Shakespeare out for a couple of minutes, I did not return to the hospital. I was afraid to leave the house since the 2003 New Year had just arrived, and the sounds of fireworks and bullets could be heard nearby. I waited until the morning and returned to the hospital where my father was staying.

New Year's Day arrived, and luckily my father had made it through the night. I went to the hospital as soon as I could. My sister and mother went home to take a break. As I walked into the room, I saw my father on the hospital bed, grabbing his arm. As the hours passed, I noticed he kept holding his right arm. I looked around to see whether I could find someone who could check on my father, but at that time there was nobody in sight. Eventually my father stopped holding his arm, so I assumed he felt better. As I sat there for a while, I realized my car keys were missing. I decided to go back to my car and check whether I had left them inside my vehicle. I was afraid someone would break one of the windows and steal my car.

Once I got to the car, I found the keys inside. Luckily nobody had driven away with my car since I had left one door unlocked. I decided to go home for a couple of minutes and check on my dog, since my house was roughly three minutes away. As soon as I arrived at my home, I heard the phone ring. It was my sister, telling me the nurse had called, informing her that my father was dying. I couldn't believe it. I had been in his room no more than five minutes ago, and

I was getting this terrible call. I immediately rushed to the hospital, but by the time I got there, my father had passed away. When I entered his room, I could see my father lying there on the bed, his body still warm and his head covered with a cap I had bought for him in London. I decided to remove his cap. At that moment I felt so guilty, thinking that if I hadn't left the keys in the car and gone home, I could have been with my father when he died.

After my father passed, I noticed a change in Shakespeare, my dog. Whenever my mother or I went into what had been my father's bedroom, I noticed Shakespeare wouldn't go into that room. My mother couldn't understand his behavior, so she got upset with Shakespeare for refusing to enter the room. I could tell Shakespeare wasn't comfortable going into the bedroom, so I finally told my mother to leave my dog alone. As time passed Shakespeare eventually began to behave as usual and started to enter the room that had been my father's bedroom. As I look back, I think about how strange situations can be. There were times when I went to the cemetery to visit my father's grave, and I took both my mother and Shakespeare with me. I noticed my mother refused to get out of the car once we were at the cemetery. Her behavior reminded me of Shakespeare's behavior when he refused to enter what had been my father's bedroom. I continued to visit my father's grave whenever I could; as for my mother, she totally stopped going to the cemetery.

CHAPTER 18

Moving On

Spring arrived, and I was ready for a change in my life. I wasn't fond of the nosy neighbors to one side of my house or those across the street with their tiki torches. I decided it was time to sell my tiny house in the city and buy a house in a suburb just minutes away from my house. This was the time when buyers couldn't be too choosy, since homes were selling like hot potatoes. I looked all summer long, and every house I liked seemed to be under contract. I thought there must have been a conspiracy against me, because I couldn't seem to find a house I liked that wasn't under contract. Searching for the house of my dreams was one task, and continuing the search for my great-grandmother's birth certificate was another. Although the years had passed since my grandfather died, I continued to search for the information related to my great-grandmother's birth certificate. Summertime arrived, and I started to call different churches in the northern state of Coahuila, Mexico, in search of that missing birth certificate. Nevertheless, I always encountered a barrier. As usual, nobody could give

me any information about my great-grandmother's birth certificate.

September arrived while the teachers and students prepared to return to work. By now I had given up looking for a new house and for my great-grandmother's birth certificate. I just assumed a new house wasn't meant to be in my near future. Worst of all, my home computer had broken; therefore, I had no way of checking the lists of homes the real estate broker had sent me. Upon returning to work, I was able to read all my e-mails. Days passed, and I was finally able to get my home computer fixed. As I read my e-mails, I saw two properties that were for sale nearby, so I decided to check them out from the outside. As soon as I saw the second home for sale, I realized it was the home of my dreams. Suddenly I recalled a coworker who had previously told me that when I found the house of my dreams, I would know that was the one. The next morning I e-mailed the real estate broker and told him I wanted to see the home I had seen the night before. That evening the real estate broker and I went to see the home. The house was exactly the one I had dreamed of having. It was a ranch with all the rooms on one floor. Although the washer and dryer were in the basement, the house had an attached garage, and it was a brick house. That night on September 11, 2003, I put in an offer, and within hours, I was told the house was mine. I felt as though I were in heaven. I had finally found the house of my dreams, but now I had one problem remaining. I hadn't sold the house I was living in, nor had I put it on the market. Since it was a sellers' market, as soon as I put my house up for sale, people started coming to see what I had to sell. I sold

my house within three weeks and moved into my new home on November 20, 2003, the day my parents would have celebrated their wedding anniversary had my father not died.

That winter was different from previous ones. I drove to school using a different route, one that took me on a path by a forest preserve. The path made the trees look as though they had been painted white as the snowflakes fell on their branches. Although the driving took longer, I didn't mind, because the scenery was so beautiful. I remember how nice it felt to be living outside the city of Chicago. All my life I had lived in the city where I was born. Now I was able to live wherever I desired since the Chicago Board of Education had changed its rules. For years the teachers working for the Chicago Board of Education had to live in the city. However, it was different now for the older teachers. We were given the opportunity to live wherever we pleased. This new rule applied to older teachers who had been working for the Board of Education for many years. In the meantime, my mother couldn't get used to the idea that Shakespeare, my dog, and I were now living farther away from her home. With time she began to accept this. Although I was a new resident in Park Ridge, it felt as though I had always lived there since my sister and her family had been living in Park Ridge for years. I was basically always in town; I just didn't have an address there until now. I loved my new house so much that I stood outside and hugged the brick walls. My mother came over and spent some time with me; however, as much as I tried to convince her to move in with me, she just couldn't get used to my new place. She was in love with her house as much as I was in love with mine.

One day a couple of relatives went to my house to pay me a visit. I thought it was very strange that one of them should start telling me a story they had heard within the family years ago, related to Spanish-Jewish people who had migrated to Mexico. As the conversation continued, I began to get information from one of my relatives that perhaps there had been Spanish-Jewish ancestors on my grandfather's side. When I heard that, I felt strange, because I knew both of my maternal grandparents had been devoted Catholics. The thought troubled me—not because there could be the possibility that some of our ancestors had been Jewish but because I had no knowledge of any Spaniards leaving Spain due to religious persecution. I was also informed that we had English blood on my grandfather's side. The news struck me like lightning. All our lives we had known my parents were Mexican with some Spanish ancestry; however, the thought of Jewish or English on my grandfather's side was something of a shock. It was as though I were being told I was adopted. I had nothing against the Jewish or English people; I just couldn't imagine any Jewish or English background existing in my family. When I asked my mother about the information I had been told, she said she had heard something about English but had no idea about the Jewish background.

By now I knew more about computers and how to search for information, so when my relatives left, I immediately began to search for information related to Spanish-Jewish people who had settled in Mexico due to religious reasons. As I began to read, I learned that many years ago, there had been numerous amounts of people who had left Spain due to religious persecution. Many had settled in the areas where

my maternal and paternal grandparents were from. I started to read about the food some people used to eat. I connected their food to the food we ate at my grandparents' home. There were many things I was learning related to that group of people who had settled in the northern states of Mexico, which I could connect to my family. Some of the kinds of food they ate were nopalitos lampreados, capirotada and cabrito, which is roast goat. As I continued, I compared the situation to that of the United States. Although many people who live in the United States may eat pizza, gyros, or tacos, that doesn't mean we are all of Italian, Greek, or Mexican backgrounds. The different kinds of food previously mentioned are part of the different cultures that come to the United States. As people arrive in the United States, they may be introduced to many kinds of food. Perhaps some of the food served at my grandparents' home originated from Spanish-Jewish people and had become part of the culture in the northern states of Mexico.

As I continued to read about the Spanish-Jewish people who had gone to Mexico and Texas, I realized many had settled in the northern states of Nuevo Leon and Coahuila, both states being the home states where my parents were from. I began to read about the pastries eaten among Sephardic Jewish people who had settled in the North, and they were the same pastries we ate at my maternal and paternal grandparents' homes, some of which were pan dulce, pan de semita, trenzas and cuernos. Not only did I discover what kind of food Spanish Sephardic Jewish people had brought to the towns where my parents were from, but I also discovered my father's mother's maiden name, which

was Garza, a Galician and Basque surname. It was the surname of many Sephardic Jewish people who had settled in Monterrey Nuevo Leon many years ago. Whether my family had a Jewish or English background, it took years before I would find out.

CHAPTER 19

The C-Word

It was now 2005. It had been four years since Shakespeare became part of the family. There were evenings when I came home from work and sat down on my sofa to enjoy some peaceful moments, just watching my favorite shows on the television. Suddenly I felt a big mop on my lap that began to sniff me. It was none other than Shakespeare. As I watched the interesting program, I ignored my companion's sniffing and make him get off the sofa. Days and weeks went by, and I noticed Shakespeare continued to jump on the sofa and do the same thing. During the month of March 2005, to be exact, I had a mammogram. After the mammogram, I was notified that my results were normal. I was very happy, as all women are when they get good news about their results. The end of June came by, and students were out for summer vacations. Once I was out for the summer months, I decided to paint the walls of my house now that I was on vacation. I remember asking one of my coworkers how she managed to have such a thin waist, because I was starting to get bulges around my waist. She told me she did sit-ups, so

I decided to do some as soon as the summer began. While I was practicing my exercises, I noticed Shakespeare came up and sniffed as he had back in March. Days passed, and Shakespeare continued to do the same thing every time I did my sit-ups. I soon became concerned and remembered a show I had seen on television about a woman who had a dog. The lady explained that her dog had been sniffing a sore on her leg for some time before she decided to go to the doctor. When she did go to the doctor to get a checkup, she found out she had cancer on her leg. For some unknown reason, I never forgot that show, and I immediately connected it with what was happening to me. I decided to set up an appointment with my doctor. On the day of the appointment, my doctor reminded me that my last mammogram was fine. I told her I was having sharp pains on the left side, so she decided it would be a good idea to send me to a specialist.

The weeks were going by fast, and it was soon time to return to school. I made an appointment with the specialist, who happened to be a surgeon. The day of the appointment arrived, and I went to the specialist's office. Funny how the minutes feel like hours when you are waiting in a doctor's office, and you can hear the medical staff outside the room you are in either walk by or talk to other people. The doctor finally came in and examined me. I was told I would need a biopsy and that the results would be available within about a week. In the meantime, I had the biopsy and waited for the results to come back.

September fifteenth arrived, and my school celebrated that day by having a group of mariachi play for the students and teachers. Once it was three o'clock, the students went

home, and I went to pay the specialist a visit for my results. I was politely asked to wait in a room before the doctor could see me. I clearly remember the doctor entering the room, sitting down, and getting to the point. The look on the physician's face was so cold. She was very blunt as she told me I had cancer. When I heard her pronounce that word, it was as though someone were sentencing me to death. I didn't know what to say. I was speechless. She left the room for a couple of minutes, perhaps to give me a chance to get a grip on what she had just told me. As I sat there, all I could think of was Shakespeare. Had I not paid attention to his sniffing, I wouldn't have returned for a further checkup. At the same time, I was very grateful to my regular physician for having sent me to the specialist when she did. Once the specialist returned, I told her I couldn't understand why I had been previously told my mammogram results were fine, but now I was being told I had cancer. Everything seemed so confusing, yet I knew in my mind that mammograms aren't able to detect cancer all the time. She didn't say anything, and I wasn't expecting a response. After all, I wouldn't like to be a physician who has to tell a patient she or he has cancer. I went home, not knowing how I was going to tell my sister or mother I had cancer. When I called my sister, she didn't take it too well, but to my surprise my mother who had cancer in her mid-forties took the news with ease. She thought if she had survived cancer many years ago, she knew I could too.

Those were very trying times for me. I didn't know what to do. The doctors gave me some options as to what would be best for me to fight this horrible disease. The day

finally arrived when I went in for surgery. Before leaving my house, I felt as though I was going on a vacation. I had to make sure Shakespeare would be taken care of during the time I would be out. I took him to my vet so they could take care of him. My sister and I went to the hospital early that morning. For some strange reason, I wasn't nervous. When I got to the hospital, I was asked to go to a room where the nurses helped me get ready for the surgery. All I recall is having some sort of mask placed over my face; before I knew it, I was completely knocked out. A couple of hours passed, and I found myself feeling kind of groggy. Once I woke up, I was taken to another room, where I spent the night. The next morning my general doctor came in to visit me, and to her amazement, I seemed to be very jolly. Perhaps she couldn't understand why I was so happy. The reason was because I had been able to get rid of the cancer that could have taken my life had they not discovered I had it. After the surgery, I was given medication so I could recover from the problem I had.

For some time, I wasn't able to visit my mother as I used to. My mother's health was starting to decline due to the lack of food intake. Although my sister visited my mother every day and took lots of food to her house, my mother didn't want to eat very much. She began to lose weight. She lost so much weight that the doctor had no choice but to give her strict orders. She could either move in with my sister and her family or be placed in a nursing home. It was necessary for her to live with someone so she could be taken care of. At that point she decided to go to my sister's house. I eventually recovered and returned to my job. Summer arrived, and by

now my mother looked better. She had gained weight and was happier, because she was living with someone. Perhaps the fact that she had lost so much weight while I was recovering was a blessing in disguise.

CHAPTER 20

Bereavement

Two years passed, and it was now early November 2007. As usual my dog, Shakespeare, and I continued to visit my mom at my sister's house. During my visits, I began to notice my mother was slowly starting to form a world of her own by thinking and speaking of relatives who had passed on. I tried to change the conversation to those who were still alive, but the more I reminded her of our relatives who were alive, the more she brought up relatives who had passed. As the days lingered, there was only one relative she mentioned who was still alive. It was my mom's uncle, who lived in Mexico. My great-uncle Segundo was my maternal grandmother's younger brother. At least there was one person in her conversation who was still alive. Unexpectedly we were notified that he too had become part of history when he died. After knowing about my great-uncle's death, we decided not to tell my mother about it. We were trying to prevent her from becoming too focused on those of the past.

With my great-uncle's sudden death, I started to think

of the times he visited my grandparents' home in Mexico. Memories were coming back of how my great-uncle used to sit by my grandmother's dining room table and look out toward the window. I recall that his blue eyes matched the color of the sky. He had the most beautiful blue eyes I had ever seen. Back when we were young and went to Mexico, my sister, my cousin Lupita, and I loved going to his home during the summers when we visited my grandparents. He and his wife, Flora, had a couple of sons and two daughters. They were all very good looking. It wasn't so much the color of their eyes and hair that captured our attention. It was their good-looking genes. I couldn't complain, even though I didn't have their looks. At least my eyes were healthy enough to enjoy observing their good looks. I started thinking of my maternal grandmother and her siblings, who had either green or blue eyes. As for my mother, her siblings, and the next generation of first cousins, nobody had inherited green or blue eyes, but thank God we were all healthy. Funny how one thought can move to another thought, and before you know it, your thoughts have traveled so quickly that now you are on a completely different topic.

December was suddenly here, and we were beginning to celebrate the family birthdays and holidays that fall in December. This year I was unable to put up the Christmas lights before the third of the month. I always try to put them up before my nephew Dan's birthday. However, that year we decided to celebrate his birthday the same day as my niece Stephanie's birthday. My sister and her husband invited the family to celebrate Dan and Stephanie's birthday on a weekend. As the family members joined to celebrate their

birthdays, I could sense a detachment between my mother and the rest of the family. It was as though she didn't want to be part of the family anymore. She seemed to be emerging into her own world, perhaps the world of those who had left her behind. I kept insisting that she join us in the kitchen, but she declined to do so.

I anxiously waited for the birthday of me and my sister to arrive. I couldn't believe this would be our fifty-second birthday. Once the school day was over, I went home to see how Shakespeare was doing. As soon as I arrived at my house, I took Shakespeare, and we went to buy a cake in hopes of celebrating the occasion with my sister, her family, and my mother. When it was time for the candles to be lit, I noticed my mother's interest was quite distant. That evening she didn't even want to go to the kitchen to listen to the two old toads sing happy birthday to each other. Seeing my mother's disinterest, I quickly became bothered because I knew this was an important day, yet she had chosen not to participate. Once again it was as though she were starting to detach herself from the real world and find comfort in her own. We exchanged gifts, laughter, and complaints at the same time regarding my mother's absence when gathering at the table.

As days passed, one of the holiest nights had arrived. It was Christmas Eve. This was the night I always spent with my parents when they were both alive. I would bake my famous Mexican pastries, called buñuelos, at home. The sweet taste of the crispy pastries made my lips melt as I pondered the sweet dessert I would prepare. This Christmas Eve was quiet as I left my sister's house and headed toward my own.

By now it was eleven thirty at night. I decided to take a quick shower and attend midnight Mass. The church was jammed as usual, and I had to stand by the side aisle during the long service, because I had arrived late as always. I have thought of the day I die. I might end up getting to the pearly gates late, or perhaps I might be called to heaven a half hour earlier so I can get there on time. When Mass was over, I went home and headed straight to bed. This time I wasn't in the mood to bake my famous buñuelos. Christmas Day arrived, and I went to my sister's house to spend the day with her family and my mother. We had a delicious dinner and opened our Christmas gifts. Days passed, and New Year's Eve was suddenly upon us. I was invited to a family's party. I had a good time as usual, laughing with my relatives, eating lots of food, and waiting for the New Year to arrive. We had a great time at the party as always, and the celebrations continued the next day. Those two weeks of vacations were great. I could get up late and do whatever I wanted until I realized the two weeks were over.

It was soon time to return to school, and my busy schedule resumed as usual. I always dreaded the days when I had to prepare lesson plans for the next week. I always found it so boring to sit at the computer and type up lesson plans for a job I had for almost twenty-nine years. It was a cold Thursday evening, and for some reason I didn't want to go over to my sister's house to visit my mother. I was too tired, so I decided to stay home that evening and forget about walking Shakespeare. Instead just let him out for a couple of minutes in my backyard.

The following day I got up early to go to work. The

students were still in their lazy mood since they had recently had two weeks off. When the school day was finally over, I decided to leave my lesson plans inside my desk drawer. As I was driving home, something in my mind kept bothering me. I kept asking myself why I hadn't left the lesson plans on top of the desk for the substitute to see the following Monday. I ignored my thought and continued my journey home. That Friday evening Shakespeare and I went to visit my mother. She seemed to have a slight cold, and before I went back home, I told her I would return the next day to see how she was doing. Saturday morning arrived, and I got up early as usual. While I was fixing the bed sheets, I began to think that same thought I'd had the previous day. Why had I not left the lesson plans on top of the desk for the substitute to see the following Monday? As I was thinking that thought, the phone rang, and I rushed to see who it was. Since it was only seven a.m., I thought it was strange for my sister to be calling so early.

As soon as I answered the phone, all I could hear my sister say was that our mother had passed away. I was in shock. I couldn't believe what my sister was telling me. I started to cry and quickly hung up. I had to call the school to notify Ms. Stoll, my principal, that my mother had just passed away and that I wouldn't be able to go to school that week. Suddenly the thought of my lesson plan book came back to my mind. Strangely enough, now I understood what that thought was related to. It was just odd that it had come right before my mother's death. I rushed to my sister's house, and when I arrived all I could see was my sister bent over my mother's body. I began to cry as I saw my mother's lifeless

body lying on the bed. Within minutes the ambulance arrived, and the paramedics eventually took my mother's body to the hospital. My sister, her husband, Ralph, and I went to the funeral home to make arrangements for my mother's funeral. Everything seemed so surreal I couldn't believe what was happening.

CHAPTER 21

Housing Market

In the meantime, I had to face the fact that not only had my mother died, but now I was stuck with two houses to care for: my house and my mother's house on the northwest side of Chicago. I remember going to my mother's house after having made her funeral arrangements. While I was in her house with Shakespeare, I was painting the walls so her house could look good, hoping one day someone would purchase it. At the same time, all I could think of was my mother's body at the funeral home. The feeling I experienced during that evening is unexplainable. I was mourning for my mother, yet at the same time I just wanted someone to purchase her house so I wouldn't have the responsibility of having to take care of two homes. By now the house had been on the market for over a year. Due to the housing market crash, it hadn't been sold in part because of my fault. Months prior to my mother's death, we had received an offer by a couple interested in purchasing the house. A neighbor passed by that day, and I mentioned the offer. He didn't think the offer was high enough, so I

went and told my mother what he thought. Both my mother and I decided we should wait for a higher offer. My sister, on the other hand, thought we should sell the house. We ignored her suggestion, which was one of the biggest mistakes I could have made. As one can imagine, the buyers eventually bought another house. I regretted this for the coming years. I learned my lesson, which was to take the offer and run.

My mother's wake and funeral arrived, and many people attended just as they did when my father passed away five years previously. After the services, I asked one of my cousins whether she would help me put the house up for sale once more. The house wouldn't sell mainly because I had been stubborn. This was a horrible time for me. As time passed, I kept lowering the price of the house in hopes of selling it. The buyers were now the ones playing hard to get. Every Christmas would come by, and I made sure to decorate my parents' house with lights and a little Christmas tree. I wanted the Christmas spirit to be part of the house, even though nobody was there while the house was up for sale. My cousin's contract to sell the house was just about up when someone seemed to be interested in purchasing it. The only problem was getting the girlfriend to like the house. As it turned out, she wasn't interested, so I asked my cousin to take the house off the market. I was tired of dealing with those snobby buyers. During this time, my thoughts regarding the information related to my ancestors had ended. The only thing on my mind was selling the house without having to rent it.

It was now almost one year since my mother had died,

and the house had been on the housing market for almost three years. Every year that passed and the house was still on the market, I buried a small statue of St. Joseph in the backyard, hoping the house would be purchased. By now I had buried three St. Josephs, and I was still in the same situation as before. I had two houses to deal with and one check coming in. A coworker and friend, Carol, from school had just sold her father's house in Park Ridge. She told me about the agent who had helped her, and I agreed to meet with the agent. We immediately put the house up for sale, and within a few months, a married couple, whom I believe came down from heaven, made an offer to buy it. On March seventeen, Saint Patrick's Day, an offer was made for the house. Two days later, March nineteenth, on the feast of St. Joseph, the house I had been having so much trouble selling sold. Praying to St. Joseph had paid off. Although the price of the house had gone down due to the housing market, I was the happiest person on earth. Now I was going to be able to concentrate on my house without having to rent the house, which had been my parents' for almost thirty years. When the day of the closing approached, my sister and I went to my attorney's office to meet the buyers. I remember the beautiful bouquet of flowers they brought on that day. I in turn left a beautiful orchid in the living room, welcoming them to their new home. That was one of the happiest days of my life.

Summer approached, and it was vacation time. My sister and I took off to Madrid, Spain, to celebrate the selling of our parents' house. When we arrived at Madrid, it was hot but beautiful. We saw lots of beautiful places in Madrid. Some of the places we enjoyed visiting were the beautiful Royal Palace

(Palacio Real de Madrid), the Plaza Mayor, and the Prado Museum. The museum has dazzling displays of artwork by great European artist. When we finished touring the museum, we decided to see some outstanding flamenco dancing, and we ate lots of paella. After spending a couple of days in Madrid, we went to Barcelona. My sister and I were going to take the train to Barcelona. Since there was a fire due to the hot summer Spain was experiencing, we flew to Barcelona, where we met my niece, Stephanie. We had the best time of our lives. We visited the beautiful, unfinished church, La Sagrada Familia, by Antoni Gaudi. If anyone should ever go to Barcelona, La Sagrada Familia is the place to visit. The magic fountain show was also something magical to see. I enjoyed walking down Las Ramblas Street, and at the same time I managed to lose ten pounds during the trip. When we visited a beautiful beach in Barcelona, my sister and I were the two oddballs who didn't wear modern bathing suits to the beach. That may have been a reason why I had so many problems getting someone to help me open my umbrella. As we sat on the warm sand, I could hardly believe I was looking at the Balearic Sea, which is part of the Mediterranean Sea. The scene was just beautiful. Later I decided to take a dip in the water, which felt just great. Even though the water felt cold, the warmth of the sun's rays kept me from freezing. Later we returned to the hotel for some dinner. By now our vacations had come to an end, and it was time to return to the United States. When we arrived at O'Hare, I remember the first thing I noticed was that most of the people there had too many pounds to spare. Unfortunately, as time passed, I gained the pounds I had lost while on the trip.

CHAPTER 22

The Discovery

Shakespeare, my pet dog, was beginning to show his age, at least in terms of taking naps. I got home, and he would only come out from under the bed to greet me, and later it was back to the same spot under the bed. There were times when I felt I didn't have a dog in my house, so I decided to purchase a bird. I wasn't sure what kind of bird I wanted. I just wanted something that made a sound in my house besides the television or the radio. My love bird, Winston, joined the family. Now it was Shakespeare, Winston, and I. Winston was beautiful. The feathers on his face were bright orange, those on the top of his head were yellow, and the rest of his body had yellow-and-green plumage. My love bird wasn't a very friendly bird at first, perhaps because sometimes he got out of the bird cage, and I had to chase him with a towel or a net and put him back into his cage. This happened twice; then I realized how smart Winston was. One day Winston got out of his cage, and to my surprise he went back into the cage all by himself. I had to be very careful every time I cleaned his cage; otherwise he

was out within seconds. As time passed, I allowed Winston to get out of his cage just while I was cleaning his cage. Then he went back inside by himself. Winston loved Shakespeare. No matter where Shakespeare was, Winston always found him. At times Winston sat on top of the door leading to the garage. One day I didn't see Winston by the door, and as I opened it, Winston flew out. Suddenly I saw Winston fly toward the tallest tree in my backyard. I assumed that would be the last of my bird. However, within minutes I took Shakespeare outside by the driveway, hoping my bird might fly back. Well, the minute Winston saw Shakespeare sitting on the driveway, he flew and sat right by my dog. At that moment, I threw the fishnet over Winston and put him in his cage. Now, whenever I go out through the garage door, I make sure my multicolored love bird is nowhere in sight.

The year was 2009; by now the situation in my life had changed. I felt it was time to start searching for my great-grandmother's birth certificate once more. This particular summer was a lucky one. When I called long distance to one of the parishes in the northern state of Coahuila, I was very fortunate to speak with a young lady who guided me in the right direction. She told me about someone in Saltillo Coahuila who knew about genealogy. I quickly called him and gave him the names of my maternal grandparents and great-grandparents. I gave him other information he asked related to the family and told me I could get the information I was searching for from a Mormon temple. Well, when I heard that, I felt as though my hopes had gone down the drain. I didn't know of any Mormon temples close to my house, and to make matters worse, I didn't think about

investigating whether one existed close to my house. I just assumed all Mormon temples were located somewhere in the state of Utah. I thanked him and went on with my life.

Spring arrived, and I was invited to my sister-in-law's Easter party. Her sister-in-law, Joanne, and her husband, Joe, who happens to be Ralph's brother, have always been very nice to me. They have two great sons, who always call me Auntie Leny, just as my sister's great kids do. I'm a very lucky auntie. I always get invited to their New Year's or Easter parties. This time it was their Easter party I was invited to. Joanne invited one of her many friends and family over that day. During a conversation, Joanne's friend mentioned that she had been going to a Mormon temple to get information related to her ancestors. When I heard her mention a Mormon temple, I wanted to know where it was so I too could get the information I was seeking. As soon as I found out the location, I dashed as fast as I could to Skokie, Illinois. That is where the Mormon temple is located. I spent my summer vacations in Skokie, Illinois, searching for my maternal great-grandmother's birth certificate. I never thought the answer to my search was located not far from my house. Searching for my grandfather's mother's birth certificate was difficult, because I had to order many microfilms and go through each of them in a dark room. After searching through so many microfilms, I was finally able to find my great-grandmother's information. Seventeen summers had passed since I first started my search for my great-grandmother's birth certificate, and the moment of discovery finally arrived.

As I set my eyes on her birth certificate, it was as though

the dark room I was in had suddenly become bright with a glow of light. The information I had been searching for was finally in front of my eyes. It felt as though my ancestors who had passed away were all smiling down on me, because of the discovery I had just made. I had finally accomplished that dream my grandfather had wanted to accomplish before he died. Before leaving the temple, I made plenty of copies of her birth certificate and went home.

I was the happiest person on the planet. Days went by, and I returned to the Mormon temple to begin the search for my maternal grandfather's father's side of the family. I was able to go back to the early 1700s. As I read their information, I was able to confirm that my ancestors were Catholic and of Spanish descent.

Once I obtained my maternal grandfather's information, I decided to look for my father's parents' information. Both of my grandmothers had lost their mothers at an early age. As for my paternal grandfather, we really didn't have much information about his family, because my father hardly spoke of my grandfather's side. The search continued, only this time I had a place where I could go to obtain what I wanted. Time passed, and I was able to get as much information as I could regarding my father's side of the family using microfilm. When it came to searching for my grandmother on my mother's side, her information was very difficult to read. By now I was tired of searching. Not being able to read the information related to my maternal grandmother's ancestors, I gave up. I felt I might end up going blind just trying to decipher what was being presented in front of me. All the information seemed to have been

washed away like when a paper is wet, and the ink becomes blurry. I decided to leave the temple and not return that summer. As I drove away, I felt as though I were abandoning the search for my maternal grandmother's ancestors. I felt terrible, yet I needed to get some rest. I decided to stop searching for her ancestors and get on with my life.

CHAPTER 23

The Search Continues

Before the summer vacations started, our principal decided to retire; therefore, we were now getting a new principal for the school year. I had been teaching second grade for some time now, and I was wondering whether I might end up being told my position would change. You never know what to expect with a new administrator. Luckily the year went by, and I wasn't informed of any changes. The next school year arrived, and I was asked to go to the office. To my shock, I was told that I would be teaching prekindergarten. I was annoyed with the new grade I was being given; however, I was happy I had a job. Before the students started the new year, I organized the new room for the new grade level. Suddenly I started to panic. I didn't know who would be more frightened, me or the three-, four-, and five-year-old children I was going to get. I had never taught children that young, and I basically didn't know what to do. I was so used to teaching students how to read that when I started my year with preschool children, I began to treat them like older children. I assumed they were

going to learn how to read until I realized these children weren't coming to read but to socialize. The curriculum was very different from the children I was used to teaching. The school months passed, and I became accustomed to the younger students and the curriculum.

Spring arrived, and I found out Paul McCartney was coming to Chicago. I was so excited; I hurried up and bought some tickets over the Internet for me and some relatives. I couldn't believe I was going to see one of the Beatles live in concert. The day of the concert arrived, and the weather couldn't have been any better. The concert was outstanding. I could see the audience stand up and applaud time and time again whenever Paul sang a song that brought back memories. When the concert was over, I thought of the first time I had seen the Beatles sing on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, the day I assumed I was going to see some bugs sing on TV. My family and I had a wonderful time enjoying the songs that were sung by the one and only Paul McCartney. When the concert was over, I knew by the looks on spectators' faces that they were more than satisfied with his performance.

Summer arrived, and so did my vacations. I decided to return to Second City and take a couple of classes. I hadn't taken any classes at Second City in some time, because of some expenses I had to pay off. By now I was in my fifties, and the rest of the students were much younger than I. They had some devices in their hands I wasn't very familiar with. Not keeping up with the times, I continued with my dinosaur cell phone while everyone else had something more up to date. I remember sitting in the room during the break

while the instructor was out taking his own break. Although the room was generally full of students, I felt as though I were the only one there. Everyone was busy ignoring me, because they were on their phones texting someone they knew. I recall growing up in a time when people talked to each other whenever there were people nearby. Now life was different. Nobody was talking to each other. Everybody was too busy poking buttons on his or her phone, trying to communicate with someone who wasn't in the room. I felt so isolated; I wanted to shout and tell them, "I'm here. Why doesn't anyone talk to me?" By the time that class was over, I knew my acting years were coming to an end. The excitement I once experienced had diminished. I had already been an extra in ten movies. I had taken many acting and improv classes in different theaters, and I had been in numerous plays.

Time passed, and it was the end of my third year of teaching prekindergarten. By now I was starting to feel guilty that I hadn't done very much to find out who my maternal grandmother's ancestors were; I hadn't done as much research for her as I had done for my other three grandparents. A couple of weeks passed, and I contemplated putting more effort into finding out about my maternal grandmother's ancestors. Once again I began to look for her information. This time I decided not to return to the Mormon temple. I had already gone through that and had been unable to read the information I obtained about my maternal grandmother's ancestors due to the fact that the information on the microfilm appeared all washed up. I decided to go to the Internet and see whether I could get some help there.

By now I had heard good things about websites, such as Familysearch.org and other sites. I decided to look for my maternal great-grandparents. Luckily, I knew their names, the dates they were born, and where they had been born. As I started my search, I was able to find as much information on my grandmother's mother as I could. The next evening I continued my search from where I had left off. This time I began to search for my grandmother's father's side. As I continued my search, I noticed I was going back further in time than when I had searched for my other grandparents' ancestors. While I continued my journey back in time, I started to see titles for princes, princesses, kings, and queens from Spain. By now I was going back to the 1200s. I was curious about these people with those titles, because I had never known about the existence of any prince or princess in my family. Although I knew some of my ancestors were from Spain, I was unaware of royalty. Being inquisitive about these people who held these titles, I continued clicking on their names. Since I was unfamiliar with names of Spanish royalty, I continued clicking until one name captured my attention. As I clicked on her name, I soon realized who this princess was. She was Eleanor of Castile, the daughter of Henry II, king of England, and her mother was Eleanor of Aquitaine. I decided to go back and click on the princess's husband's name, Alfonso Sanchez VIII. I soon discovered he was the son of Sancho III of Castile and Blanche of Navarre.

I couldn't believe what I was seeing. I had discovered people within my family tree who at one time ruled Spain, England, and France. As I continued clicking on names, I found myself going back far beyond my wildest dreams.

Days passed, and I looked up the names of the people I had found on the Internet. Now I was being given the opportunity to read about the lives of people who at one point in their lives had ruled nations. As soon as I had the opportunity, I immediately informed my sister of my discovery. The discovery I made was a surprise not only to me but also to my sister and her family. We couldn't believe what I had just learned. As days passed, I retraced the names of my ancestors, who had led me to my new discovery. I had so many names to trace back that I felt like I was going through a maze. Although I spent hours in the evenings retracing my ancestors, I didn't care, because I knew at the end of my journey there were kingdoms within the family tree to be found. The month of June 2013 arrived, and I wrote to someone I never imagined I would be writing to. The letter I wrote was to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. In my letter, I explained about the years I had spent searching for my maternal grandfather's mother's birth certificate and that this quest had led me to discover my maternal grandmother, Eloisa's family tree, henceforth leading me to the names of those who at one time had been part of royalty.

CHAPTER 24

A Royal Response

Summer vacations finally arrived, and I felt I was free to do as I pleased now that I didn't have to go to work. I got up later than usual and enjoyed watching the morning shows on television. One day I heard that Her Majesty, the Queen, and the royal family were waiting for the birth of the royal baby of TRH Prince William and the Duchess of Cambridge. I also heard on television that Her Majesty was looking forward to spending time in Scotland. Days passed, and the world was informed of the royal birth of Prince George. The cameras showed the royal baby when his parents, Prince William and the Duchess of Cambridge, exited the hospital where he was born. The royal prince was very cute.

That summer was a quiet one. I concentrated on doing lots of garden work, attending the health club, taking my little Shakespeare for walks, feeding my little love bird, Winston, and at the same time cleaning his cage. Meanwhile Winston took a break, flying around the room and pestering Shakespeare, who loved to stay either under or near the bed.

Summer vacations were coming to an end, and I had

to start preparing my classroom for the new students who would start their prekindergarten year. I decided to return to school two weeks earlier than usual to unpack the school materials I had packed up in June. Once I arrived, I found myself all alone in the new building that belonged to the prekindergarten teachers and students. One day while I was in the preschool building, it felt scary being there all alone, so I decided to leave earlier. That afternoon I was in the mood to go to Lincoln Park Zoo, so I headed straight toward the zoo after I left school. As soon as I arrived at the zoo, I realized I had made a bad choice, because it started to pour, so I went home right away. When I got home, I checked my mail as usual and saw an envelope that appeared somewhat different from those I normally received. Not checking from where the envelope had been sent, I cautiously opened it up, and to my surprise it was a letter from Her Majesty, the Queen's lady-in-waiting. On August 12, 2013, I was very fortunate to receive a letter from Balmoral Castle, located in Scotland. It was the place I had previously heard on television, where Her Majesty was planning to spend her summer vacations. She had asked the lady in waiting to thank me for the letter I had sent her months prior. As I read the letter, I could hardly believe I had received a letter from royalty. I, a teacher from the Chicago Board of Education, who had been teaching for over thirty years, had just received a letter from Her Majesty's lady-in-waiting. I was so excited to have received a letter from royalty that I went to show it to my sister and her family, and later I told my friends and relatives I had received a letter from Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II's Lady in Waiting.

Months went by, and December arrived like an iceberg. It was one of the coldest months I had ever experienced in my life. The snow seemed to have fallen earlier than in previous years. I wasn't very excited about the snowfall, largely because I have always been the one to clean hills of snow in front of my house with the snowblower. That month the students and school staff were busy decorating the rooms and halls with holiday decorations the students had made. Whenever I got a chance, I rushed to buy Christmas presents for my relatives and pets; then I began to decorate my house for Christmas. Christmas Eve arrived, and I began to bake my Mexican pastries. Once I was finished baking them, I went to midnight Mass. Luckily that evening I was able to arrive on time and find a spot to sit. The following morning Shakespeare and I went to my sister's house to celebrate Christmas, one of the holiest days of the year. Winston, my love bird, had no choice but to get stuck at home and wait for us to return. Christmas Eve and Christmas Day are the holidays I truly love. They are the holidays most people are happy celebrating with their loved ones. On Christmas Day my sister, Lulu, and Ralph cooked a delicious meal as usual for the entire family. It was strange how, with every Christmas that went by, I noticed new people who joined us at the table and missed those who had departed. This Christmas it was my mother who sadly would no longer be with us on that day. Everyone enjoyed eating roast beef with Yorkshire pudding, sweet potatoes, baked potatoes, corn, and lots of other delicious food. Once dinner was over, we had buñuelos, my Mexican pastries I always bake. Once we were all stuffed, we attacked the gifts under the tree.

Shakespeare got some bones to chew on and a toy, while Winston got some seeds for Christmas when we went back home. I received hats, jewelry, and clothes.

New Year's Eve approached, and I was ready to go to my sister-in-law's party. Joe and Joanne always have a great New Year's party. Luckily their home is still close enough, so I don't have to worry about driving back home on New Year's. I always make sure I don't eat very much that day, so I can stuff myself with all the goodies they serve in the evening. That evening I watched how many hors d'oeuvres I ate. I didn't want to ruin my appetite for the homemade sandwiches everyone would pitch in to make. Then there was be a contest to see whose sandwich was decorated the best. I ate so much that I thought I would be rolling back home instead of having to drive. They also had lots of games to play to keep the party going. Once it was time to welcome in the New Year, everyone got ready to ring in the New Year with hats, whistles, and noisemakers. I remember all the energy I used to have when I welcomed the New Year. It seems like the more New Year's I welcome in, the less energy I have to do so. I didn't take long after the New Year had arrived before I decided to take off and hit the sack.

It was now time to return to school, and this winter was colder than that of previous years. The days were so cold and full of snow; I remember dressing up like a bear just to go out and remove the snow with my snowblower before it froze. Although I have always hated going out in the evenings to clear the snow from the sidewalk, I knew the result would be worse if I allowed the snow to build up until the next morning. The extreme cold winter days continued

while the teachers and students had to face reality as everyone else who works does. It was time to return to school and face those icy roads in Chicago. It was so cold that the Chicago Board of Education decided to cancel classes twice, something it hardly ever does. I don't recall seeing as much snow as I did in that year of my life. I felt as though I were living at the north pole. I remember going back home in the early evenings and having to walk Shakespeare for a couple of minutes. Since he loved going for a walk in the park, we got in the car and drove for a couple of minutes to the park. We got out of the car and walked half a block along the lonely park. It was so cold and dark that people were nowhere to be seen. Everyone was inside, keeping warm while Shakespeare and I were leaving our footprints and pawprints in the snow. It felt so lonely and creepy to be outside by myself with Shakespeare, so within a few minutes, we got back in the car and headed home, where it felt safe and warm. I thanked God for the home we had.

Easter would soon be here, and I decided to send Her Majesty, the Queen, an Easter card, wishing her and her royal family a happy Easter. Once Easter arrived, I spent it with my close relatives while Shakespeare and Winston stayed at home, guarding our property. I had a great Easter as always at Joe and Joanne's house with their two sons, Nick and Matt. My sister, Ralph, Stephanie, Andy, and Dan were there including Ann, Ralph's sister, and his dad. The food was awesome, and their house was so beautifully decorated. I was thankful to have been able to spend that day with family. The next weekend we celebrated my nephew Andy's birthday at a Spanish restaurant I love going to, because

they offer a variety of tapas. Every time I go there, I am reminded of the time I went to Spain with my sister and niece. A couple of days later, I was very happy to see a royal envelope in my mailbox. By now I recognized what they looked like. I received a royal letter from Her Majesty, the Queen's lady-in-waiting, thanking me for the Easter card I had sent Her Majesty. I called my sister to tell her about the letter I had received, but instead I got the news that a family member had been rushed to the hospital. The next day I received a text from my sister, stating that her father-in-law had passed away. As the moments went by, I came to realize how bizarre life can be. Within a matter of seconds, a person can experience both joy and sadness. I was happy to have received a letter from the Queen's lady-in-waiting, yet at the same time I was also sad to hear the news about my sister's father-in-law.

CHAPTER 25

An Unexpected Surgery

Weeks continued to pass as the summer months arrived. It was time to begin packing up books and school supplies now that the school year was ending. I could hear the sounds of my students' voices as they were preparing to begin their summer break. Days went by, and the last day of school arrived. It was time for the students to take a break from the books and the computers, which had permitted them to gain the knowledge they had acquired during that school year. It was also time for the staff, including me, to depart from the busy schedules we had during the school year, refresh our minds, and prepare ourselves for the coming year.

The summer days were now upon us, yet this year was different from most. The months of June and July were somewhat cooler than those of the previous years. This summer was not only cooler but also much rainier than previous ones. I recall during the last weeks of June that the Chicago area had terrible thunderstorms. Having experienced an unusually cold winter, I was eagerly waiting

for the normal 80-degree weather we usually have during the summer. This summer was taking longer than usual to get warm. Fortunately, by the Fourth of July 2014, the weather started to change for the better, at least in my opinion. Those cool, dreary spring and early summer days were finally over including the gray, cloudy sky that kept hiding the sun for months. The warm days of summer were finally here, and I began to take advantage of my summer break. There were so many chores to be done around the house. If I wasn't cleaning the house, I was pulling weeds and making my garden look nice. Then there was time caring for my bird Winston and taking Shakespeare for walks. I loved taking Shakespeare for walks in the summer as long as he didn't take forever to sniff the grass, trees, or whatever his nose found pleasure sniffing. Walking Shakespeare gave me the opportunity to meet people and their pet dogs. At times I felt as though I knew the neighborhood dogs' names better than I did their owners. I have also loved going for walks by myself. I could get more walking done if I walked by myself and at the same time admired the nice homes around the neighborhoods. Before I knew it, I could tell summer was coming to an end as the sun started to set earlier and the days grew shorter. That year it was as though summer had taken a break while autumn was trying to claim its share sooner than it should.

My summer vacations of 2014 had finally come to an end. I had to return to my job as a teacher and start organizing my room so my new students could find an area where they would feel welcome, be ready to learn, and socialize, which are some of the many things three- and four-year-old

children do in prekindergarten. The long journey that had brought me to this point of time was now taking a toll on me. By the end of this school year, June 2015, I would complete my thirty-sixth year with the Chicago Board of Education. As the days passed, I felt I was moving at a much slower pace compared to even five years before. I wasn't sure when I would be able to retire, yet at the same time I was grateful for the years I had spent teaching, even though there had been some rough times in the past. I knew for whatever I had obtained in life, I owed it to my job and to those I had taught. I was grateful not only for my students but also for their parents. I always felt that without them, I wouldn't have had the opportunity to teach their children. Even though there were times I spent complaining to my mother about the difficulties one encounters as a teacher, I was very grateful to her. She was the one who had encouraged me to become a teacher in the first place.

I found this year to be more challenging than the previous ones. For six months, I experienced a sharp pain in my left leg. The pain was so sharp that I could hardly sleep at night. Tests done on my leg confirmed that my pain was due to a torn meniscus. I received physical therapy and some shots to help control the pain. Unfortunately the pain continued throughout the following months. As the winter days went by, I continued to drive to work down Dee Road just to look at the snow covering the trees and their branches. As I drove to work early in the mornings, there were four different occasions when I experienced a strange feeling I had never had before in my life. Somehow I felt a peaceful feeling within me. I heard something in my mind

telling me, *You're done. It's over.* I couldn't understand what that feeling meant; I just knew it felt great. When I arrived at work, I remember telling my teacher aide, Rosita, about the peaceful feeling I had experienced. Nevertheless, I just managed to ignore those feelings and continued with my job. I remember telling her the one thing I always prayed for was to have the opportunity to retire. Nevertheless, I also told her I planned to work a couple of years before retiring.

It was now the month of February, and I still experienced the same sharp pain in my left leg. Now I felt it was time for me to visit a bone specialist. I assumed he was going to tell me about my torn meniscus, but to my surprise, it was a knee replacement I was told I needed. Not only did I have a torn meniscus, but I also had bone on bone, causing my leg to hurt so much. The pain was so unbearable that I immediately agreed to have the surgery. The date for my surgery was set for April 6, which was the day after Easter. In the meantime, I got as much work done in my classroom as I could so there would be a smooth transition between the time I was to leave for my surgery and the time the new substitute teacher would be in my room. My last day of teaching arrived, and the students had a party in the classroom. I told them I would be back before the year was over and reminded them to obey the new teacher they had for the next couple of weeks.

Early Saturday morning I took Shakespeare to the vet so someone could care of him while I recovered from my surgery. I felt bad knowing my little Shakespeare would spend this coming Easter at the vet, but at least I knew someone would be there to care for him. Easter Sunday was here, and

I went to church that morning. Since I was late to church by five minutes, I had to stand throughout the Mass due to the big crowd. When the Mass was over, my left leg was killing me, but I managed to hang in there until the end. That day I took Winston with me to my sister's house. He was probably wondering why he had been so lucky to spend Easter at my sister's house. Being a bird, he was unaware that he was to stay there because I was scheduled for surgery.

My family and I had a wonderful Easter meal, yet the memory of my little Shakespeare was in my mind due to knowing he was at the vet that day. Although I knew I was going to have surgery the next day, I hoped it would relieve me from the pain I had been experiencing for the past year.

My sister went to my house early the next morning and drove me to the hospital. The trip to the hospital reminded me of the time when I had breast cancer. Although this was a different type of surgery, I began to feel scared just thinking that something might go wrong. Good thing I had dropped off Shakespeare at the vet's office early Saturday morning; otherwise, I would have felt worse knowing I had to go to the vet before going to the hospital. Once we arrived at the hospital, I started to feel more at ease. The medical staff prepared me for the surgery, and I was finally given the anesthesia and lost all consciousness. Four hours later, I found myself in the recuperating room. Before I knew it, I was being asked to take a few steps. That day wasn't as difficult. I remember being given plenty of medication to relieve the pain. The next day I was asked to walk around the hall. This time, however, my walk took a toll on me. For a minute I thought I was going to faint. Luckily my room was close

by, and I was able to get into my bed. The hospital staff was very nice and helpful. That was when I realized how special those who work in the hospital could be. As the days passed, I began to walk a little better and started to practice going up and down a couple of steps.

A couple of days passed, and I was released from the hospital. As soon as I got to my house, I noticed my leg started to swell. I thought I was going to have a heart attack due to the thought that I might have done something to cause my leg to swell. I immediately called my doctor and within a couple of minutes found some relief when I was told that the swelling was due to the movement of my leg. As the days passed, I began to get physical therapy at home. People came to help me move my leg and give me physical therapy. If I didn't do the required exercises, my leg would stiffen up. No matter how many exercises I did, I kept having trouble bending my leg to a certain degree. That's when it hit me. I started to feel depressed, thinking I would never get my leg to bend to the degree my doctor wanted. After a couple of weeks, the physical therapists who would come to my house had completed their job. Now it was my turn to go somewhere else and practice doing physical therapy. Within a couple of weeks, I started to feel an improvement in my leg. I was beginning to bend it more, but this didn't come without experiencing great pain. I remember having to take pain medicine before I had physical therapy so I could do my exercises. There were times when I screamed from the pain, but without that push from the therapist, I never would have been able to bend my leg to the degree I was required to do. I was so involved with my recuperation that

I forgot I had a job waiting for me. I just assumed I would return within a matter of weeks. Time passed, and I came to realize my teaching years were coming to an end. I felt I couldn't return to my job. That's when I remembered the times I had been driving to school, and I heard something telling me, *You're done. It's over.* Perhaps it was only wishful thinking.

CHAPTER 26

The Final Year

It was the month of May, and I had to do something before the school year ended. I knew the school contract was going to be over, and I didn't want to continue teaching with a new contract if it was going to jeopardize my pension I had worked so hard for. I decided to call the staff who worked for the Chicago Board of Education and inquire about retirement. Everything came like a flash. As soon as I received the paperwork and returned it completed, the school board accepted my resignation for retirement. I couldn't believe what was happening. I felt as though everything occurring was surreal. Having taught for thirty-six years, I was finally going to call it quits. I continued to go to physical therapy, but now it was different. I knew my teaching years were over, and for some reason I felt at peace. Weeks passed, and my physical therapy sessions were completed. I continued to do the exercises I was required to do for me to keep my knee from feeling stiff. I eventually joined another health club to continue my exercises.

On June 18, 2015, Hanson Park School honored four

staff members who were retiring. One of them was me. That was a very busy day. That morning I had to take Shakespeare to the vet for some annual tests. Since Shakespeare had spent weeks at the vet while I was recuperating, he wasn't too happy to see his buddy, the vet, again. Later I went to get my hair done at the salon. It was extremely expensive, but I didn't care. I was planning to retire only once in my life, so it was now or never. Once the people at the beauty salon were done transforming my look to a shorter length and a lighter shade, it was time to go home and get ready for the party. I took a quick shower and decided to wear a white dress I had bought some time ago. I put my heels and jewelry on and drove off to my sister's house since my sister and Ralph had been invited to my retirement party. All this felt so bizarre. I couldn't believe I was going to attend the party that would initiate the end of my teaching years. As I walked into the restaurant, I could see many of my coworkers and retired friends at the party. I decided to walk around and thank the people who were there for taking the time to share the event with me and those who were also going to retire. The other coworkers who were retiring were just as happy as I was, walking around and thanking those at the party.

In the background, we could hear the music playing while the people mingled. It was time for the meal to be served, and after everyone had salad, the main course included chicken, beef, potatoes, vegetables, and dessert, I felt as though I were going to roll out of my chair. I ate as though it were the last meal of my life. Tom, who was in charge of planning the party, had us get up and give a little speech about our experiences as teachers. One thing I

recalled was the first day of my teaching job thirty-six years earlier. I remembered the children I had first seen jumping on their desks as I asked myself when I was going to retire. At that point in time, I realized it had taken me thirty-six years to answer that question. Nonetheless, I was thankful God had given me the opportunity to help more than one thousand children in their learning.

Days passed, and I returned to my job for the last time. As I started to put things away for the closing of the school year, it felt as though I were doing it to prepare myself for the start of another summer vacation. This time, however, it would be different. Yes, the school staff was preparing for another summer vacation to start without the students, yet in the back of my mind I knew I wouldn't be returning the following September. Although it was bittersweet to know I wouldn't be seeing my coworkers in September or any new students, I knew it was time to put aside the school supplies that for so many years had helped me to teach. I recognized my teaching years had finally come to an end, and the feeling I experienced was one of ecstasy. It felt as though all the years I had spent teaching were chapters of a very long book in my life, and now I was on the last page of the last chapter of my book. The hours and minutes passed, and I eventually went to the office to say my final goodbye to the administration at Hanson Park School. As I swiped out for the last time, I thanked God for giving me the gift of life to see my retirement day. Although these thirty-six years had taken me through rough times, I learned that in life there are lots of ups and downs, but without them life would only be a plateau. A life that doesn't offer challenges lacks the opportunity for transformation.

CHAPTER 27

A Trip Overseas

It was now June 2016; a year had passed since my retirement. I had spent most of my first year of retirement concentrating on my knee replacement by exercising at home and at the health club. My sister and I decided to return to London, England. This time we were also planning to visit the city of Edinburgh in Scotland. On the day of the trip, Shakespeare was acting strange. He might have guessed that something different from the usual was going to transpire. Perhaps he had picked it up from the previous night, since I had spent part of my evening emptying out my drawers, trying to figure out what I would wear on my trip. That morning I got up very early and took a quick shower. Afterward I put Shakespeare in the car for a visit to the vet. I could tell he wasn't a happy camper. Once we arrived at the vet's office, Shakespeare knew it was trouble for him. Unfortunately, he wasn't allowed to spend ten days with me on my trip, so I had no choice but to leave him in the care of his vets. I felt awful about leaving him there as always, but I did what I felt was best for him.

I knew my sister would be picking me up at home, so I

went home as soon as possible. As soon as I arrived home, my sister picked me up, and off we went to her house. Ralph was waiting outside with the cab driver, who took us to the airport. I was so excited that I forgot to go into their house and say goodbye to Winston, my bird. Luckily I had dropped him off the previous evening at my sister's home so Ann, Ralph's sister, could feed him while we were on the trip. I didn't feel so bad for Winston, because I knew he was going to have my sister's finch, Omega, nearby.

As soon as we arrived at O'Hare Airport, I decided to have something to eat before boarding the plane. As we sat in the waiting area, I could hardly believe I was returning to London. The hour finally arrived for us to board the plane, but to my surprise I was asked to get my ticket checked. For a minute there, I thought I wasn't going to be able to go on my trip. Luckily everything was fine, and I was told I could get on the plane. My sister and her husband were already inside the airplane. As the stewardess led us to our seats, I realized this trip was going to be different. We were going first class. I wasn't about to argue with the airline stewardess as to why we were being seated in first class; I just accepted what was given to us. Although I had never sat in first class before, I knew the trip to London was going to be quite relaxing. It was a smooth flight, and within a few hours, we were instructed not to get up since the plane would be landing at Heathrow Airport. As soon as we got off the plane, we picked up our luggage and headed to Kings Cross in a taxi. It took us almost an hour to get to the station.

We were able to see a lot of London by taxi on that cool, cloudy day. I couldn't believe how close the taxis were

driving next to each other without crashing. There were slim people all over the streets, rushing to get to their destinations. My first thought as to why most people were so slim was because they took public transportation. This made them move more than people who just drove back and forth to work every day. Once the taxi approached the train station, we quickly got out and rushed to get our tickets. To our surprise the train scheduled to take passengers to Edinburgh, Scotland, had been cancelled, so we had to rush to another train station before the next train left.

We were lucky to get a taxi to take us to the next station just on time to catch the train. Once we boarded the train to Edinburgh, Scotland, I was surprised to see how comfortable and clean their trains were. The scenery to Scotland was very beautiful. As the train traveled to our destination, I felt as though I were taking a trip through the state of Wisconsin in the United States. I recall telling a couple who were sitting by me how similar the landscape was to that of Wisconsin. They kept telling me that as soon as the train got to Scotland, the landscape would begin to change. Well, sure enough; as we entered Scotland, the landscape did begin to change. I noticed the land was hillier, and much of it was covered with tiny yellow flowers. I asked the couple what those tiny yellow flowers were, and they said the flowers were used for cooking. I thought the gentleman sitting next to the lady was her husband. He seemed to be very friendly toward me, considering they were married. It wasn't until one stop before we got off that I realized they weren't married. He said goodbye and departed. That was when I noticed the lady was single.

We finally arrived at our destination, and it was time to get

off the train. As we gathered our luggage and left the Waverley train station, I could hardly believe the beauty before me. I felt as though I were in an enchanted land. While we walked along Princess Street, the first thing I saw was the Scott Monument, which stands 197 feet tall. I had never seen anything like that. It was spectacular. The Scott Monument is a Victorian Gothic monument dedicated to Sir Walter Scott. It was so beautiful that I felt I was in a fairy land. As soon as we arrived at the apartment and settled in, we decided to walk through the streets of Edinburgh. I noticed their buildings are constructed of very large stones compared to those in the Chicago area, which are made of brick. I also noticed the streets were made of cobblestone as the paths curved, leading us toward other city streets. I could see a large number of stores in single files as the structure of the streets and buildings curved; it was unlike anything I had ever seen or could imagine.

As we walked through the streets of Edinburgh, we finally reached our first destination, the Castle of Edinburgh. While we walked down the path toward the castle, I couldn't stop thinking of the strenuous work people had put into building such an enormous fortress on a volcanic rock. Once we reached the main entrance, I could see the portcullis gate as we stepped on the cobblestone pathway, which led to the castle. Next to the gate was a steep flight of steps named the "Lang Stairs." Instead of climbing the steep stairs, the guide suggested that we take the cobbled road to the summit, and we were able to see the Argyle Battery, consisting of a six-gun artillery battery. Standing by the Argyle Battery, I was able to see the city of Edinburgh. Everything was so beautiful and different from what I was used to seeing back in Chicago.

The next morning, we headed toward the Palace of Holyrood house. The palace is surrounded by a beautiful landscape that includes colorful gardens full of luscious flowers. As we approached the Queen's Gallery, we saw large, beautiful portraits of members of the Royal Family. I was amazed to see such enormous tapestries hanging on the walls with portraits of Scottish royalty. Continuing our way into the palace, we came to a beautiful staircase made of stone. Looking up, I could see details of plasterwork in the ceiling displaying figures of angels including a crown, the scepter, and a sword. It was all so amazing to look at. Once we entered other rooms, it was astonishing to see not only that these rooms were equipped with elegant furnishings of kings and queens from the past but that each included such ornate ceilings and elegant chandeliers. Not only did some rooms include tapestries that continued to hang on the walls from the late 1700, but I also saw beautiful carvings of lions on some of the woodwork. Our walk through the palace led us to the largest room in the palace, which was the Great Gallery. As I walked through the room, I couldn't help noticing the great number of portraits of Scottish royalty hanging on the walls. While I observed each portrait, it was easy to tell that every person who represented the Scottish royalty was related, because they all resembled each other. Once we were done seeing everything in the palace, we continued observing the beautiful gardens surrounding the palace. As we walked along the gardens, I could imagine those from the past, who at one time had worked so tirelessly just to make this castle exist for so long.

The next morning, we took a cab to Her Majesty's royal

yacht, known as the royalty yacht *Britannia*. Although the royal family no longer uses the royal yacht *Britannia*, the public can tour it. When we arrived, we joined a tour so we could see what it was like inside. We saw many different rooms, which were kept up so beautifully. I couldn't believe the yacht included a hospital in case someone from the royal family needed medical attention back when the royal family had occupied it. There were pictures of Her Royal Highness and the royal family in many places of the yacht. I was even able to see a picture of the late Princess Diana and Prince Charles as they held their children in their arms. After the tour finished, we had lunch in the Tea Room. I felt as though I were living a dream.

As we left the Tea Room, we headed toward the Grass Market Street. The view was amazing. The buildings were all so close to each other that it seemed as though they had been built as one big building. The streets on which these buildings were built wound in forms of curves. I couldn't understand how these buildings could have been built since they weren't made of brick but of large stones. As we continued to walk, we found ourselves lost. We were unable to find the place where we really wanted to go. Eventually we arrived at Pine Street Gardens, which had some of the most beautiful gardens I had ever seen. Luckily, we went when the flowers were in full bloom, and their fragrance seemed to drift everywhere. As we walked through the gardens, I could see so many different-colored flowers bursting against the green foliage of trees. It was beautiful visiting Edinburgh and getting to see so many wonderful sights.

The next morning, we woke up early and headed to

the station to catch a train, which took us back to London. Edinburgh, Scotland, was a beautiful city to visit, but now it was time to return to London and see other things London had to offer. As the train departed from Edinburgh and headed toward London, I noticed that the route this train was taking was different from the one the first train had taken when we first arrived at Edinburgh. There was luscious green grass, which spread across the terrain, with sheep grazing in the fields. Suddenly, as the train continued its route, I could see the seagulls along the shores of the North Sea. It was amazing to see communities of people who had built their homes close to the shore. It was apparent that the people of these communities depended on the abundance of sea life the North Sea offered. As the train continued its journey and approached London, I started to notice the homes were different from those I had seen in Scotland. These homes were constructed of brick and not of large stone. As for the structure of the homes, I saw I could speak only of those I had seen on my way back from Edinburgh. I assume the homes in Scotland may differ depending on the area. The landscape began to remind me of the state of Wisconsin, which included more trees than what I had seen in Scotland.

Once we arrived in London, we wasted no time on where we were staying and went directly to the Tower of London. It had been many years since we had visited the Tower of London. We were lucky to join a group of tourists being led by a tour guide. As we walked along the area, I couldn't help but think of those who had lived there long ago. Not only did I see the paths others from long ago had walked, but I also walked on the path many queens had walked when

they were condemned to death on Tower Green. As I stood at that site, I couldn't help but feel bewildered to consider how such cruelty could have existed among people who were members of their own family. When we continued on our tour, the scene had a different feeling as we reached the crown jewels. Now at last I saw a breathtaking collection of fabulous crowns, precious stones, and the Sovereign's Orb. As I observed the crown jewels, I kept imagining how much all those precious stones must be worth. Nevertheless, I didn't dwell on that thought, because I knew I couldn't afford any of them.

Once we finished seeing the beautiful crown jewels, we headed toward St. Paul's Cathedral. Since I hadn't been there in roughly fourteen years, I had forgotten that this cathedral wasn't catholic and contained within it statues of angels and fallen soldiers. It was beautiful to see that St. Paul's Cathedral is a place where so much respect is given to the fallen soldiers who fought to defend England. Not only is there so much veneration paid to the British soldiers who had paid with their lives, but there is also much respect given to the American soldiers who gave their lives to help England during the war.

The next day we visited Kensington Palace. Before arriving at the palace, we walked through a beautiful park, which led us to the palace. As we approached it, I spotted an iconic statue of Queen Victoria in her coronation robe situated in the middle of a pond. Upon entering the palace, I caught sight of a beautiful staircase with a portrait of TRH Prince William and the Duchess of Cambridge holding their newborn infant, Prince George. As we followed the

path, we were led into rooms that offered a collection of apparel worn by Her Majesty, the Queen; Princess Diana; and Princess Margaret. As my eyes caught sight of such beautiful garments, I couldn't help but recall the times I had seen Her Majesty, the Queen, and Princess Diana in magazines, wearing what was now being presented before my eyes. When we continued on our tour, there were stunning portraits on the walls and ceilings of kings and queens from the past. The staircases, which led us to other rooms, were so beautiful and ornate that I couldn't believe there could be so much elegance before my eyes. Continuing on our tour, we were taken to the beautiful gardens surrounding the palace. These gardens possessed such beauty and tranquility. Every piece of greenery seemed to be in place. The flowers, shrubs, ponds, and trees appeared as though they were all part of a portrait. Then came the moment when I laid my eyes on what had been at one time the living quarters of Princess Diana, Prince Charles, and their children, Prince William and Prince Harry. Although we weren't allowed to go inside, in my mind I could imagine seeing Princess Diana running after her children as they wandered through the gardens of that magnificent palace. By now we were getting tired and decided to return to our apartment for some rest.

The following day we decided to take a trip to the British Museum. I hardly remembered anything about the British Museum since it had been such a long time since last I was there. Upon entering the museum, we quickly went to the Parthenon sculptures, known as the Elgin Marbles. This is a collection of stone sculptures and architectural pieces that once adorned the Parthenon in Athens, Greece. As we

continued our tour, we were able to see the colossal granite head of Amenhotep III. The gigantic sculpture seems to represent a pharaoh who ruled Egypt thousands of years ago. There is also a large chess set carved from ivory and whale bones. I noticed this large chess set captured the interest of many male visitors including my brother-in-law. As we walked through the corridors, we were able to see the sculptures that once decorated the palace of King Tiglath-Pileser III in the Assyrian capital of Nimrud in northern Iraq. I was amazed with the beautiful sculptures people from that era had created. I was amazed with the intricate artwork the people of that era had accomplished. Once we entered the section that displayed magnificent artwork from Mexico, I felt so proud to see that something so positive related to Mexico was being displayed in a museum, where thousands of people visit yearly. This feeling was especially so since the political atmosphere due to the presidential election of 2016 back in the States was portraying such negative views of Mexico and its people.

After seeing everything we wanted to observe in the museum, we headed toward Big Ben and Westminster Abbey. As soon as we arrived at Westminster Abbey, it began to pour. Unfortunately, we were told that the public wouldn't be allowed to enter the abbey, because of the rain. We decided to go to a local shop and buy some umbrellas to protect ourselves from the rain. It was fun touring the wet streets of London that day; however, it was now time to return to the apartment we had been renting to prepare for our sightseeing the next day.

It was now June 9, 2016. This would be our last full day to enjoy walking the streets of London before we returned

to Chicago. That morning we got up very early and walked to see Big Ben. We made our way to the area where we could take a boat tour and were able to see London from a totally different angle. As the boat arrived at its destination, we started our tour at Greenwich. The town of Greenwich is very beautiful, and its landscape is very green. Although we didn't spend much time there, we got to see the Royal Observatory in Greenwich. It was now time to get back on the boat, which had brought us to Greenwich.

Within a short period, we were back in London. We tried to hurry that day so we could see as much as possible. One of the nicest places we visited that day was St. James Park. It was a beautiful, sunny day. As we toured the park, I was lucky to take the Diana Princess of Wales Memorial Walk. There were beautiful birds I had never seen before swimming in the water. The trees and flowers surrounding the park made the area come alive. I could see children and adults as well as my sister and brother-in-law; and I enjoyed the magnificent beauty of this walk.

As we continued, we arrived in front of Buckingham Palace. While we were in front of the palace, I wondered whether Her Majesty, the Queen, could be in the palace at that moment. I couldn't believe I was actually standing in front of the place where she lived. This was a beautiful day. I could see the sun shining on the lovely flowers, which surrounded the palace grounds. I couldn't believe how beautifully arranged the flowers were. Not only did the flowers make the area look beautiful, but there were numerous British flags flying above the street that day. This day would be a day of celebration for the people in London. You could

see hundreds of people on the streets, making their way to the area where the festivities would take place. I was surprised to see such a large number of security people on the streets. Later that day Her Majesty, the Queen, and the royal family would take part in the festivities. I finally realized the reason why there had been so much security in the streets. Seeing such an enormous number of people that day made us think of what the underground trains would be like within a couple of hours, so we decided to head back to our apartment.

Once we arrived at our apartment, it was time to get ready for the next morning. That day we woke up early to take our plane back to the United States. Our trip had been something beyond our wildest dreams, but it was time to head home. As I walked along the halls of Heathrow, I could hardly believe it was an airport with its elegant shops. As we boarded the airplane, I knew we were now heading back home. Hours passed, and before we knew it, the plane was landing in Chicago. Although our trip had now ended, it was a good feeling to be back. The best thing was knowing we were home safe.



Edinburgh, Scotland

CHAPTER 28

The Parting

It was now time to pick up Shakespeare, who had spent ten days at the vet. I had already picked up Winston at my sister's house, whom Ann, my sister's sister-in-law, had taken care of. After picking Shakespeare up from the vet's office and driving through the streets of Park Ridge, I could hear Shakespeare begin to howl. I knew he was as happy to see me as I was to see him. Once we arrived home, Winston started to tweet and flap his wings when he caught sight of Shakespeare. Now we were back to home as usual. Whenever I let Winston out of his cage for a couple of minutes while I cleaned his cage, he went straight to where Shakespeare was and walked in front of Shakespeare's face to get his attention.

As the months passed, autumn arrived faster than I could have imagined. One day I went to the grocery store to buy some food. While I was putting the groceries in my car, I got my right foot caught in front of the rear wheel. As I turned to get the grocery bag, I twisted my leg and felt a sharp pain in my right knee. It was so painful I could hardly stand. Days went by, and I started to get the same sensation in my right

leg as I had on my left leg just before I'd had the first knee replacement. I decided to make a doctor's appointment to see what was going on. I was told I needed to have physical therapy for the next six weeks. I attended the same place I had attended when I had my left knee replacement over a year ago. Once the sessions were over, I continued going to the flower shop as a volunteer. By now I had been a volunteer at Lutheran General's Flower Shop for almost two years. The days and months went by, and the sensation in my right leg continued. Since it was the same feeling I had experienced in my left leg, I decided to seek a different doctor than the one who had performed the previous surgery two years ago. I just wanted a different opinion. After many tests, the orthopedic doctor told me I had bone on bone. Since he was very well recommended, there was no sense in making the pain continue for months or years, so I followed the doctor's instructions and decided to have a right knee replacement. The date for the surgery to be performed on my right knee was almost exactly two years from the date I had my first knee replacement, which would be April 4, 2017. Knowing I would be unable to send Her Majesty, the Queen, an Easter card during the month of April, I decided to send her the Easter card in March and explain why I was sending it so early.

A couple of days before my surgery, I had no choice but to take Shakespeare back to the vet so he could be taken care of during the time it took me to recuperate from my second knee replacement. I knew my little dog wouldn't be happy to return to the vet for boarding, but I had no other option.

The day of the surgery arrived, and like the previous time, I wasn't very nervous. Thank God for my sister, who

has always been there for me. She went to the hospital with me, and we waited until it was time for me to go into the operating room. I went through the same procedures I had gone through previously, and eventually I was admitted into the area where I had my surgery. Before I knew it, I was knocked out cold, and within a couple of hours, I was back in the recuperating room. Everyone was very nice at the hospital. Many staff members on the floor where I was to recuperate recognized me, since I was one of the volunteers who always took flowers to the patients on the eighth floor. This time I was the one who was the patient and not the volunteer delivering flowers. A couple of days went by, and the medical staff decided I should go to a rehab facility instead of to my house. The moment I was released from the hospital, I arrived at the rehab facility; I wasn't very happy to be there. I felt I would be happier at home, yet it was necessary for me to get extra help. Everyone at the rehab was very nice and helpful. Each morning and early afternoon, I did my exercises as needed, ate my food, and got plenty of rest.

Although my sister, friends, or relatives visited me every day, I started to get anxious, because I wanted to go home. I eventually found out my last day at the rehab facility would be Easter Sunday. I told everyone who visited me that I didn't want them to visit me on Easter Sunday, because I wanted them to be with their families. That Easter day was the loneliest Easter I had ever spent. The only thing that kept me happy was knowing I was going to go home the next morning. Monday morning arrived, and I got up very early and took a shower. When my sister arrived, I thanked the staff who had taken good care of me, and we left the

facility. I was the happiest person on the planet just knowing I was heading home.

As soon as I went home, I began to receive home therapy for my knee. This time my surgery had gone better, and I was able to bend my knee much more than the first time. A couple of weeks after my second knee replacement, I was told I could pick Shakespeare up from boarding. I was so happy my Shakespeare was coming home. Winston had been home since I was released from the rehab facility. Now it was time for my Shakespeare to come home. As soon as I arrived at the vet's place, I spotted Shakespeare walking toward me next to his vet. As he walked toward me, I noticed his breathing wasn't the same. Shakespeare was so happy to see me that he began to howl on the way home. Once we were home, it was as usual. Winston was happy getting in front of Shakespeare's face while I cleaned his cage, and Shakespeare was happy sitting under the bed.

Weeks went by, and I continued to attend the same physical therapy facility I had attended two years ago. While I was getting physical therapy, I was told I couldn't drive, because I was taking strong medicine for my pain. However, I was encouraged to do whatever chores I wanted around the house.

As time passed, I noticed Shakespeare was beginning to get a cough. I thought he was developing some sort of allergy either to Winston, my love bird, or to the stuff I was using to wash the floors. I decided to use something different to clean my floors, and at the same time I moved Winston's cage farther away from Shakespeare. Not being able to solve the problem, I decided it was time to take Shakespeare back to the vet. Luckily by now, I had been told I could start

driving, so taking Shakespeare to get a checkup was no problem. Since Shakespeare had a heart condition and other medical problems, I was used to giving him his medicine as always. This time, however, his doctor suggested that I make an appointment with the cardiologist for pets, so I followed her suggestion and got the appointment for the end of June.

As the days passed, I noticed Shakespeare continued to cough. I got up early Sunday morning, and I went to Mass. I returned as quickly as I could. When I got home, I called the emergency office for animals, hoping they would agree to check Shakespeare's allergy. As soon as we arrived at the emergency hospital, Shakespeare was taken in for a checkup and eventually put under oxygen. I couldn't believe what was going on. Thinking it had been only a case of allergies, I couldn't understand why he needed oxygen. A couple of hours passed, and I was told he was better and that I could take him home. Nevertheless, the vet at the emergency hospital for pets suggested that I take him to the cardiologist the next day and not wait for his appointment, which would be at the end of the month.

It was now Monday, June 5, 2017. Having been advised the day before to call the cardiologist for animals, I got up very early and called their office, asking whether they could please see Shakespeare that morning instead of having to wait until the end of the month. I was thankful that they agreed to see him immediately, so I rushed him to the heart specialist for animals. Once again, they put him under oxygen and decided they should keep him there overnight. While I was in the waiting room, one of the doctors came in and told me that Shakespeare was very sick and asked me whether I wanted him to be euthanized. I couldn't believe what I was being asked.

In my mind I knew he was sick, but I had never realized how sick, so I said no. Later that morning, his cardiologist came in and told me they wanted to keep Shakespeare longer for observations. I didn't mention what the previous doctor had suggested; I just hoped my little dog would get better.

When I returned home, I felt very sad because of Shakespeare's situation. Nevertheless, I still had hope that things would get better. Once I arrived at my house, I went to check the mail. To my surprise I noticed I had received a royal envelope from London. It was a letter from Her Majesty, the Queen's lady-in-waiting. As I read the letter, I couldn't believe Her Majesty, the Queen, had asked her lady-in-waiting to write to me regarding my knee replacement and recuperation I had back in April 2017. I was so honored and happy to have received her letter that for at least that short period of time I forgot about the seriousness of Shakespeare's illness, which in reality I really didn't understand. I never imagined that two months after my surgery, I would receive a royal letter regarding my surgery and rehabilitation. A kind gesture from someone can go a long way; imagine one from Her Majesty's lady-in-waiting.

Tuesday morning arrived, and I couldn't wait to find out about my pet's condition. When I called the animal hospital, I was told I could pick Shakespeare up later that morning. When I arrived, I still didn't know exactly what his problem was until I got the bill. As I read the bill, I realized how serious his illness was. The tumor in his liver, which had been removed two years earlier, had apparently returned. Not only did he have a heart condition, but now I read he had hypertension in his lungs. Apparently this was

the reason for his coughing. At that point I felt as though my blood had drained from my body. Once the doctor came into the office, she told me what he had. Since I had already read the bill, nothing she told me was a surprise. It didn't make sense to me why they would give me the bill upon arriving to the hospital, since that was the way I was able to decipher what Shakespeare's problem was. The doctor proceeded to tell me Shakespeare had to take different medication for his heart. Now he was being given three different pills he wasn't accustomed to taking. Being so tiny in size, I assumed he would have no trouble taking the new medication with his food. Once the doctor was done speaking with me, Shakespeare and I hurried out and headed home.

This seemed to be the turning point for Shakespeare's life. No matter how much I tried to hide the pills in his food, Shakespeare couldn't get used to the new medication. This was a horrible time for my pet and me. As much as I tried to give him all sorts of food to conceal the taste, he just didn't like eating his food. Since he had to take so many pills at different times of the day and night, I had to keep buying different types of food, hoping it would distract him from the medicine's taste. A month and a half passed, and I could see Shakespeare wasn't himself anymore. Whenever he ate, he had to have the medication he didn't like. I could see he was losing weight, even though I was feeding him more than before. I eventually took him back to one of his regular vets for a checkup and was told to continue giving him the medicine.

Time passed, and it was now July 17, 2017. I had made an appointment with his regular vet. When we arrived, I started to explain to the doctor that I felt Shakespeare wasn't living

a normal life. He wasn't enjoying his food as before, because it always contained medicine. He would hardly come out from under the bed and took very short walks only when he had to go to the bathroom. To make things worse, whenever I gave him a bath, he fell on his belly and was unable to get up, because he wasn't getting enough oxygen to his brain.

That was when his vet told me Shakespeare was now in a state of "hospice." When I heard that word, I realized this wasn't a life I wanted for my pet, whom I loved so much. The doctor told me I could either have him euthanized that day or take him home and bring him back whenever I decided it would be best to have him euthanized. I couldn't see myself taking him back home and making him eat the food he had been eating with the medicine he disliked so much. He was taking too many pills per day, yet the medicine wasn't solving his problems. At that point, I decided I could no longer allow my dog to continue suffering. I knew I had to help him escape the misery he was going through. It was time for me to free him from his pain. Twelve years ago, he had alerted me that I had something wrong on my left side, which turned out to be cancer. Now it was time for me to help him escape his pain.

On July 17, 2017, at 9:30 a.m., fifteen years and eight months after I had first seen Shakespeare in my former principal's office, my beautiful little dog was put to rest. It was horrible seeing him pass away. I never imagined having to put my little Shakespeare down. I always thought dogs died on their own. When I left the office that morning, I knew in my heart he was no longer suffering, yet the grief I felt was worse than I could imagine. When I returned home, I was devastated. It's odd how little pets can sense what is

happening in their surroundings. After I let Winston out to clean his cage, as I usual did, he immediately flew under the bed to look for Shakespeare. Not seeing Shakespeare where he used to sit, Winston flew to the window where he loved looking out whenever he had a chance. That was the last time Winston returned to the spot where Shakespeare used to sit.

Although members of my family have passed, the love I have for them has not perished with their passing. It continues to live in my heart, and the memories of what they contributed to my life will continue to exist.



Shakespeare

CHAPTER 29

In Retrospect

It has been twenty-six years since I first chose to take on the task of searching for a birth certificate, which I had no idea how to acquire. The journey I have lived is one that has taken me through various pathways in life. The paths one chooses to take in life are most likely to lead a person toward different outcomes. Although the outcomes of the choices we make may not be what we anticipate, I feel it's best to make the choices in our lives rather than allow life to control the results. Had I not chosen to pursue my family's birth information, I am sure the course of my life would have been different.

I have made many choices in my lifetime that have resulted in very difficult outcomes.

However, I believe we must take advantage of the opportunities we have that count. I have lived and learned a lot from the time when I first started searching for my ancestors' information. I learned from the choices I made, and I was given the opportunity to visit places I never dreamed of

seeing and meeting people whom I never imagined I would connect with. Although my ancestors have passed away, I feel they have given me the chance to discover things I wouldn't have discovered had I not investigated their past.



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WITHDRAWN

What began as a simple quest to find her great-grandmother's birth certificate led author Elena A. Gomez to discover information beyond her dreams. In *Kingdoms Within*, she shares the story of growing up as a twin in Chicago, her experiences visiting relatives in northern Mexico and Texas as a child, and the search for her great-grandmother's birth certificate.

This memoir chronicles the events of Elena's life as a child to adulthood, with special attention given to her family history and background. The tale begins with her search for her great-grandmother's birth certificate, carrying on a mission begun by her grandfather. That quest, requiring both persistence and faith, takes Elena to extraordinary places during her life.

Filled with detailed recollections and vivid depictions of her memories, *Kingdoms Within* delves into Elena's heritage as a Mexican-American and tells about what she learns about her roots.

ELENA A. GOMEZ was born and raised in Chicago, Illinois. She earned a bachelor's degree from De Paul University and a master's degree from Roosevelt University. Elena currently lives in Park Ridge, Illinois.

Front cover image by Jill Norton

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